ResearchGate

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/392131854

Religious Deconstruction: The Process, Themes, and Psychosocial Dynamics of Deconstructing Evangelical Beliefs and Practices

Research · January 2025

CITATIONS
0

READS
73

1 author:

Mary Cole
Adams State University
3 PUBLICATIONS **3** CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

All content following this page was uploaded by Mary Cole on 28 May 2025.

The user has requested enhancement of the downloaded file.

RELIGIOUS DECONSTRUCTION: THE PROCESS, THEMES, AND PSYCHOSOCIAL DYNAMICS OF DECONSTRUCTING EVANGELICAL BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

A dissertation presented to the Faculty of Adams State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in Counselor Education and Supervision

by

Mary C. Cole

Alamosa, CO

April 2025

© 2025 by Mary Cole

Doctoral Dissertation

RELIGIOUS DECONSTRUCTION: THE PROCESS, THEMES, AND PSYCHOSOCIAL DYNAMICS OF DECONSTRUCTING EVANGELICAL BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

Mary C. Cole

This Dissertation has been approved by the committee members below, who recommend it be accepted by the faculty of Adams State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Counselor Education and Supervision

Dissertation Committee:

Bethany Adams, Ph.D., Chair

Janessa Henninger, Ph.D.

Madeleine N. Stevens, Ph.D.

School of Counselor Education
Adams State University
Alamosa, Colorado
May 2025

Abstract

RELIGIOUS DECONSTRUCTION: THE PROCESS, THEMES, AND PSYCHOSOCIAL DYNAMICS OF DECONSTRUCTING EVANGELICAL BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

Mary C. Cole

Adams State University

Religious deconstruction is a complex and increasingly prevalent process; despite this increase, which is evidenced by social media, online surveys, and non-empirical literature, it has been the subject of very limited research and counselor education and training. The aim of this study was to develop a theory describing the process of deconstructing evangelical Christian beliefs. Sixteen total participants engaged in semi-structured interviews focused on their deconstruction processes; participants were recruited via criterion-based, purposive sampling based on their self-identification as having deconstructed previously held evangelical beliefs. Constructivist grounded theory methodology was used to analyze data and to identify and explicate themes and patterns in participants' religious deconstruction processes. Categories which emerged from the data included the nature and sequence of the deconstruction process, the social context of evangelicalism, major shifts in belief and practice, relational and mental health dynamics related to deconstructing, and the factors impacting the efficacy of counseling to support clients at any stage of deconstruction. This study provided insight into the religious deconstruction process and its vast psychosocial dynamics for those with previously held evangelical Christian beliefs. This study also offered implications for counselors, counselor educators, and future research.

Keywords: religious deconstruction, Christianity, evangelical, deconstruction

Dedication

To the church kids who prayed for open eyes and hearts, watched their worlds crumble around them, and set out to rebuild brick by brick.

Acknowledgements

To Dr. Bethany Adams: I cannot adequately express my gratitude to you for earnestly joining me in the broadest conceptualizations and the most intricate details of this research. Your support felt grounding, affirming, and empowering at every step.

To Dr. Maddy Stevens: Thank you for bringing the open-heartedness and reverence with which you approach education, counseling, and the world in general to this study.

To Dr. Janessa Henninger: I greatly appreciate commitment to understanding my vision for this research and helping me put multidimensional constructs into words.

To my wife and the love of my life, Brooke Bailey: Thank you for intensely believing in me and in this project. This dissertation demanded a great deal from both of us, but things can really only ever be so hard when we have each other. I promise not to get any more degrees.

To my dad, Jim Cole: We dreamed of this day together and, while you are not here to see it, you had no doubt it would come to pass. Your love for the world, your thirst for knowledge, and your passion for reverently and wholeheartedly meeting people wherever they are in their journeys are baked into these pages.

To my two soul dogs: Rosie, who saw me through my first two years of this doctoral program, and Edith, who picked up where Rosie had to leave off: I may have deleted the many edits you made by resting your heads on my keyboard, but I will always have the sweet memories of your company through every step of this process.

To my friends and family: Thank you for caring about each high and low of this journey and for continuously and graciously showing me the meaning of community.

Finally, to my research participants: I am immensely grateful to you for inviting me into your stories and constructing this theory with me. It is a privilege I will never forget.

Table of Contents

Table of Contents v

Chapter I: Introduction and Review of the Literature 1

Background of the Study 2

Statement of the Problem 3

Theoretical Foundation of the Study 5

Purpose of the Study 6

Research Questions 6

Rationale and Significance 6

Scope and Delimitations 7

Review of the Literature 8

- Religion and Spirituality 8
  - Spirituality 9
- Christianity 9
- Evangelical Christianity 11
  - Evangelical Teachings 12
  - Evangelicalism in Culture 14

Religious Deconstruction 15

- Population Characteristics 16
- Deconstruction Precursors 17
- Deconstruction Processes 20

Mental Health Implications of Religious Deconstruction 23

- Intrapersonal Impacts of Deconstruction 23

Social Impacts of Deconstruction 24
Mental Health Community Responses to Deconstruction 26
Conclusion 27
Definitions of Key Terms 27
Chapter II: Methodology 28
Purpose 28
Research Question 28
Qualitative Research 29
Epistemological Frameworks and Theoretical Perspectives 29
Constructivism 30
Deconstructionism 31
Methodology 32
Classic Grounded Theory 33
Straussian Grounded Theory 33
Constructivist Grounded Theory 34
Reflexivity 36
Researcher's Stance 37
Researcher Bias 39
Procedures 39
Participants 39
Participant Characteristics 40
Sampling 40
Theoretical Sampling 41

Setting 41
Data Collection 41
Intensive Interviews 42
Data Analysis 43
Trustworthiness 43
Credibility 44
Transferability 45
Dependability 45
Confirmability 46
Ethical and Multicultural Considerations 46
Conclusion 48
Chapter III: Findings 49
Nature of the Deconstruction Process 49
Evangelicalism as Social Context 50
Attitudes toward Emotions and Mental Health 51
Hypocrisy 53
Abuse of Control 54
Perpetuating Abuse 57
Violations of Consent 57
Prejudice and Discrimination 58
Views of Morality 60
Purity Culture 61
Political Attitudes and Actions 63

Sequence 64
Approximate Stages 65
Latent/Pre-Deconstruction 66
Acute Deconstruction 67
Ongoing Deconstruction 71
Shifts in Belief and Practice 73
Shifts in Belief about God 73
Shifts in Belief about the Bible 76
Shifts in Belief about Humanity 78
Shifts in Belief about the Afterlife 79
Shifts in Belief about Religion and Spirituality 80
Shifts in Spiritual Practice and Identity 82
Shifts in Belief about Purity Culture 83
Shifts in Belief about Gender Roles 84
Shifts in Belief about Sexual and Gender Minoritized Identities 85
Shifts in Belief about Relationships 86
Shifts in Approach to Parenting 87
Shifts in Political Beliefs and Identities 87
Psychosocial Dynamics Related to Deconstruction 88
Relational Dynamics Related to Deconstruction 88
Rejection and Isolation 89
Betrayal 90
Family of Origin Dynamics 91

Friendship Dynamics 95
New Community Development 97
Increased Relational Health 99
Mental Health Dynamics Related to Deconstruction 100
Anxiety 101
OCD 101
Depression 103
Trauma 104
Cognitive Dissonance and Incongruence 105
Grief 106
Identity and Self-Concept 107
Self-Trust 110
Purpose 111
Freedom 112
Authenticity 113
Openness 114
Critical Thought 114
Mental Health Counseling 115
Counseling as Helpful during Deconstruction 115
Counseling as Harmful during Deconstruction 117
Summary 118
Chapter IV: Discussion 119
Key Findings 119

Evangelicalism as Social Context 120
Deconstruction Process 124
Shifts in Belief 127
Shifts in Practice and Spiritual Identity 129
Relational Dynamics 130
Mental Health 132
Identity and Self-Concept 133
Counseling 134
Implications 135
Counselors 135
Christian and Pastoral Counselors 138
Counselor Educators 138
Limitations 139
Future Research 140
Conclusion 141
References 142
Appendix A 154
Appendix B 155
Appendix C 156

Chapter I: Introduction and Review of the Literature

Religious deconstruction has increased drastically over the past decade and continues to grow in prevalence (Herrington, 2024). An increasing number of adults who grew up in religious communities, homes, and schools renegotiate their understanding of and relationship to their religious beliefs (Nica, 2020). Many who experience religious struggles, doubts, and transitions seek out psychotherapy for support in deconstructing previously held religious beliefs that have proven unhelpful or incongruent with their lived experiences (Campbell, 2020; Post & Wade, 2009). While religious deconstruction grows increasingly prevalent, little to no counseling training or research focuses on religiously or spiritually diverse clients or religious changes (Fisher, 2017; Post & Wade, 2009).

The term "religious deconstruction" is generally used to refer to a process of shifting one's beliefs. Definitions and descriptions of religious deconstruction are sparse and have emerged largely through online social media networks, self-help texts, and online surveys, tending to be specific to evangelical Christian beliefs (The Deconstruction Network, 2020; Gull, 2022; Herrington, 2024). The term itself comes from Jacques Derrida's (1967) deconstructionist philosophy, which, when applied to religion, leads to a process of critical analysis, reevaluation, and challenging of dominant interpretations and beliefs (Rassool, 2023; Williams, 2023). Phil Drysdale, founder of the Deconstruction Network, defines religious deconstruction as a process of questioning core tenets of one's beliefs and finding them unsatisfactory, subsequently altering one's belief system, and decreasing religious rigidity and fundamentalism (The Deconstruction Network, 2020).

This deconstruction process may be threatening, uncomfortable, and vulnerable for those navigating it (Herrington, 2024; Manglos-Weber et al., 2024). Religious doubt, understood to be

a primary component of religious deconstruction, typically refers to uncertainty and questions regarding religious beliefs (Dein, 2013). Doubting one's religious beliefs is a natural component of identity formation that supports identity construction (Erikson, 1963; Fowler, 2001; Paloutzian & Park, 2005). Fowler (2001) and Erikson (1963) view religious doubt as a developmental crisis involving psychological vulnerability and questioning one's understanding of the world. Shame, guilt, decreased sense of meaning, and loss of religious resources can be difficult components of the religious doubting process (Haney & Rollock, 2020). However, moving through the deconstruction process and reconstructing one's belief system can be rewarding and liberating and contribute to overall wellness (Gull, 2022; Herrington, 2024).

This chapter provides an overview of the problem of the lack in understanding regarding the process of deconstructing one's religious beliefs – especially evangelical Christian beliefs – and the need and purpose of this current research. This chapter will also delineate the study's research questions, methodology, theoretical framework, scope, delimitations, and significance. Finally, this chapter includes a review of relevant literature regarding religion, Christianity, evangelicalism, and religious deconstruction and concludes with definitions of key terms.

Background of the Study

Overall rates of religiosity, including religious affiliation, belief, and attendance, are declining within and between each generation (Monnot & Wernli, 2023; Voas & Crockett, 2005). While older groups tend to be more religious than younger groups, religiosity does not increase with age; rather, each cohort tends to be less religious than the one before it (Monnot & Wernli, 2023). Shifts in religious beliefs and identity are becoming more and more prevalent as people exit religion altogether, transition to other branches of their original religious group, or reevaluate their belief system within a religious tradition (Nica, 2020). The population of

individuals with no religious affiliation, often referred to as religious nones, has increased drastically and now represents the fastest growing and second largest religious identity in the United States (The Deconstruction Network, 2020; Pew Research Center, 2015). Large numbers of formerly identified evangelicals and other Christians, especially Millennials and Generation Z, self-identify as deconstructing or having deconstructed their faith (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Statement of the Problem

Religious deconstruction is a rapidly growing movement; however, little research and counselor training addresses the experiences or needs of those who shift their religious beliefs (Fisher, 2017). In addition to this gap in research, misinformation about the process of deconstruction is prevalent (The Deconstruction Network, 2020). The current lack of understanding regarding the experiences of those who deconstruct their religious beliefs places this growing population at greater risk for mental health concerns due to a lack of informed therapeutic care (Fisher, 2017). A specific gap in research exists regarding the experiences of those who disaffiliate from evangelical churches (Gull, 2022).

It is critical to understand the growing cohort of those deconstructing their religious beliefs, especially for those who do so in the cultural context of the United States, which holds religion as a central component of identity and considers atheists and non-Christians immoral (Jacobs & Theiss-Morse, 2013; Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2018). Religious deconstruction can be experienced as a profound loss and can be accompanied by intra- and interpersonal distress, especially in its early stages (Herrington, 2024). However, current counseling research and expertise related to clients who deconstruct their religious beliefs are severely limited (Bartoli & Gillem, 2008; Fenelon & Danielson, 2016).

Some research has explored related constructs, such as religious disaffiliation, doubt, and deconversion; however, these studies do not accurately represent the population of those who deconstruct their religious beliefs (The Deconstruction Network, 2020). Few studies have specifically explored the process or inner experience of religious doubt and its effects on mental health (Upenieks, 2021). Research that explores precursors, processes, and outcomes of religious doubt and struggle is needed (Upenieks, 2021). Barbour (1994) and Gull (2022) respectively identified dimensions of religious deconversion and a five-stage model of religious disaffiliation; though the constructs of deconversion and disaffiliation tend to address the components of religious deconstruction, no model has been established for the specific process of religious deconstruction.

The term "religious deconstruction" has no established definition and is used to refer broadly to experiences such as questioning or doubting tenets of one's faith, shifting religious beliefs or practices, or rejecting the inerrancy and authority of the Bible (Childers & Barnett, 2024). Discussions of religious deconstruction have taken place primarily in social media communities, in self-help and anecdotal literature, and through analysis of open online surveys (Childers & Barnett, 2024; The Deconstruction Network, 2020; Herrington, 2024; Pew Research Center, 2015). Some self-help style literature around religious deconstruction presents it as a healthy and worthwhile process, while some depicts the process as inherently immoral and dangerous (Childers & Barnett, 2024; Herrington, 2024). These resources are non-empirical in nature and tend to use anecdotal observations or interpretations of the Bible to address deconstruction and offer recommendations for navigating or discontinuing the process.

Theoretical Foundation of the Study

To explore religious deconstruction, this study first approaches knowledge through a constructivist lens – viewing knowledge as constructed through lived experience rather than discovered (Charmaz, 2014). Constructivism views people as autonomous, active agents in their own lives with a need for and tendency toward order, patterns, and organization; according to this framework, people self-organize by moving toward patterns and self-concepts that align meaningfully with their social context, often through story (Mahoney & Granvold, 2005). Constructivist approaches also emphasize development and change over time; significant or abrupt change may be characterized by a profound sense of loss, prompting reorganization and shifting to restored senses of meaning, identity, hope, and order (Mahoney & Granvold, 2005). In research applications, constructivism emphasizes researcher self-awareness and the importance of understanding people's experiences in the context of their unique setting (Jones et al., 2014).

A second theoretical underpinning of this study is deconstructionism, originated by Jacques Derrida (1967). Deconstructionism adds to constructivism's focus on meaning making within social context by addressing the nature and process of critical analysis, dissection, and unlearning. This deconstructionist lens provides a framework of questioning, analyzing, and renegotiating binary oppositions and established hierarchies (Herrington, 2024). Deconstruction as a process can refer to a reshaping of one's worldview, a highly individualized and idiosyncratic experience.

Constructivist and deconstructionist frameworks will each support this study's exploration of religious deconstruction. Constructivism will frame participants as active agents in their own lives seeking organization, congruence, identity, and hope through making meaning of

their experiences of deconstruction in rich social and cultural context; concurrently, deconstructionism will provide a framework for questioning, breaking down, and rebuilding one's worldview. The researcher identified these frameworks because deconstructing previously held religious beliefs is a highly personal process of critical analysis, influenced deeply by one's social context.

Purpose of the Study

By applying both constructivist and deconstructionist frameworks, this study aims to contribute to a greater understanding of the processes of those who deconstruct their evangelical Christian beliefs. This study will describe the process of religious deconstruction and will develop a model representing the process of deconstructing evangelical Christian beliefs. The purpose of this study is to allow themes and constructs in participant processes of religious deconstruction to emerge toward a cohesive theory of religious deconstruction.

Research Questions

The question guiding this qualitative study is:

Q1: What is the process of deconstructing evangelical Christian beliefs?

This study explores the deconstruction of individuals' evangelical Christian beliefs. Participants with backgrounds in any denomination or expression of evangelical Christianity who self-identify as having deconstructed their beliefs will be included in this study.

Rationale and Significance

Exploring this research question will support the development of a preliminary model for deconstructing evangelical Christian religious beliefs; this will address the need for increased understanding of the experience of religious deconstruction and the process of unlearning and reconstructing one's religious beliefs and identity (The Deconstruction Network, 2020; Nica,

2020). Findings will enhance current understandings of the increasingly prevalent experience and will inform mental health care, research, and counselor education.

To approach the subject of religious deconstruction, the researcher identified the methodological framework of constructivist grounded theory (CGT). CGT is a systematic, flexible approach to collecting and analyzing data with the goal of constructing theories from the data in collaboration with participants (Charmaz, 2014); it is rooted in Glaser and Strauss's grounded theory and its inductive and emergent strategies for developing theory grounded in data rather than deducing based on existing theories (Glaser et al., 1968). CGT, however, rejects the notion of the researcher as a neutral observer or expert and acknowledges subjectivity, social context, and interpretation (Charmaz, 2014).

CGT is appropriate for this study due to the gap in literature; no existing framework or theory describes the process of religious deconstruction. CGT is also appropriate for the population of adults in the United States who self-identify as having deconstructed their evangelical Christian religious beliefs because of the stigmatized and minoritized nature of the population. This study will be specific to its United States context, the researcher's background and decision making, and the participant group. Responsive to the unique and complex nature of religious deconstruction, CGT's emphasis on reflexivity and subjectivity will promote trustworthiness and transferability (Charmaz, 2003).

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this research is the process of deconstructing evangelical Christian beliefs. Delimiting factors include the qualitative research design, excluding numeric representations of the variable of religious deconstruction. This research will not address the deconstruction of non-evangelical Christian beliefs or of beliefs rooted in other religions or expressions of spirituality.

The study will specifically examine sequential, intrapersonal, social, cognitive, emotional, theological, and philosophical components of the religious deconstruction process. Participants may or may not have disaffiliated from their evangelical Christianity community or identity and may or may not currently self-identify with any spiritual or religious practice.

Review of the Literature

This study's purpose and research question regarding the process of deconstructing evangelical Christian beliefs are informed by a review of relevant texts and studies. This review of existing literature explores religion, Christianity, and evangelicalism in addition to potential precursors, components, and outcomes of the process of religious deconstruction.

Religion and Spirituality

Religion as a word and a construct is difficult to define (Nye, 2008); often, what is deemed religious versus secular is a "function of different configurations of power" (Cavanaugh, 2009, p. 4). Religion is commonly defined as some combination of attendance at a religious center, the study of sacred texts, and specific beliefs, rituals, and lifestyles; however, definitions such as these do not account for the influence religions often have on an individual's whole biopsychosocial being as well as on societal structure and culture (Nye, 2008). Religion incorporates a set of beliefs as well as "a framework for their lived experiences and daily practices" (Nye, 2008, p. 3). Religion is generally understood to be organized, structured, and associated with religious community, doctrine, and practice (Peng-Keller, 2010).

Although evidence suggests ancient civilizations engaged in some expressions of spirituality, religion as described above is a fairly recent and western construct (Goldenberg, 2022). The major religions of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, as well as others, offer a framework for morality and purpose (Goldenberg, 2022; Mehta & Mishra, 2024).

Organized religious rituals and activities reinforce a sense of belonging and oneness and increase individuals' commitment to their religion (Mehta & Mishra, 2024). Religious teachings often delineate moral standards, lifestyle, and gender roles and may change their rituals and doctrine in alignment with shifts in culture (Mehta & Mishra, 2024).

Spirituality

The concept of spirituality, often falsely equated to religion, is generally understood to be less rigid and organized and more eclectic than religion (Peng-Keller, 2010). Spirituality often involves the pursuit of the sacred or transcendent and belief in a higher power and is individualistic, while religion is more formal and institutional (Koenig et al., 2001; Koenig et al., 2012; Pargament et al., 2013). Spirituality may be an outcome or goal of religion and is difficult to differentiate from religion (Manoiu et al., 2023; Pargament et al., 2013).

Christianity

In the context of the above discussion of the constructs of religion and spirituality, this section will explore Christianity's history, doctrine, and predominant branches to continue setting the stage for the present study on deconstructing evangelical Christian beliefs. Christianity originated in the first century CE in Palestine and Rome, beginning as a movement within Judaism with the preaching of Jesus of Nazareth (Johnson, 1976; Nye, 2008). The Christian sacred text is the Bible, comprised of the Old Testament – the Hebrew Scriptures – and the New Testament, a collection of writings which focuses on the life of Jesus and which saw omissions, additions, and fabrications from early in the second century CE through modern times (Johnson, 1976; Nye, 2008). Ancient Christian beliefs saw divisions from the beginning but remained centered around Jesus's death, divine resurrection from the dead after three days, and ascension from earth to return to Heaven (Johnson, 1976).

Many councils formed to determine what would become Christian doctrine (Johnson, 1976); today, Christianity varies widely in doctrine and practice and includes distinct branches. Tenets that generally transcend denominations and divisions include the beliefs that God created the world; that God exists in three distinct persons, God the Father, Jesus Christ (the son of God the Father), and the Holy Spirit; that humankind is sinful in nature and deserving of eternal torment; that Jesus was sent to earth through the Virgin Mary; that Jesus lived a sinless life on earth before being crucified and then resurrected from the dead; and that Jesus's death atoned for humanity's sin, allowing for people's redemption and admittance into Heaven through belief in Jesus (McGrath, 2006). Christian values in the United States tend to emphasize communal worship, conservative values, heterosexual monogamy, and individual achievement (Nye, 2008).

Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant branches of Christianity are predominant among those that emerged through divisions in the church (Nye, 2008). Orthodox Christians, most of whom reside in Europe, represent a declining percentage of global Christians (Pew Research Center, 2017). Orthodox Christianity focuses heavily on iconolatry, which refers to worship and prayer through the veneration of religious art as symbolic of God or other religious figures. This branch of Christianity is led by married, male priests and patriarchs and tends to hold politically conservative views on social issues. Orthodox Christianity is linked with lower rates of observance and church attendance (Pew Research Center, 2017). Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Christians differ in doctrine and practice, notably holding contrasting views on Jesus's divinity and humanity (Pew Research Center, 2017).

By contrast, Catholicism is the largest branch of Christianity and is most prominent in Latin America and Europe (Pew Research Center, 2015). The Catholic Church is led by the pope, who holds the highest spiritual authority (Cunningham, 2009). Catholics emphasize

honoring Mary as the Mother of God and focus on the ritual of the prayer of the Rosary. Catholicism celebrates the seven sacraments of baptism, confirmation, eucharist, reconciliation, anointing of the sick, holy orders, and holy matrimony (Cunningham, 2009). Though wide variety exists with Catholicism, markers of the Catholic Church include precise and ritualistic practices of confession, worship, and liturgy under the leadership of bishops and the ultimate authority of the pope (Cunningham, 2009).

Finally, the branch of Protestant Christianity emerged in the 16th century from the Reformation and accounts for around 40% of global Christians (Pew Research Center, 2011). Protestantism is more diverse and less structured than the other major forms of Christianity and views the Bible as the only authoritative source of truth; this branch of Christianity also focuses on salvation through faith and emphasizes religious community (Coffman, 2013). Predominant traditions and denominations within Protestantism include Baptist, nondenominational, Methodist, Pentecostal, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Anglican, and others (Pew Research Center, 2015). Evangelicalism is an identity within Protestant Christianity, but is not denomination-specific (Pew Research Center, 2011).

Evangelical Christianity

The above sections detailing religion, spirituality, and Christianity provide context for a more narrow focus on evangelical Christianity. It is important to highlight specific teachings and phenomena within evangelicalism to frame the research participants' processes of deconstructing evangelical Christian beliefs. The term evangelical most often refers to Protestant Christians who self-identify as "born again," who consider the Bible to be written by God and to be supernaturally preserved through history and translation, and who engage in individual, personal relationship with Jesus (Kidd, 2019). These criteria distinguished evangelicals from other

Protestants of the 18th century. Many who meet these criteria do not identify with the term evangelical, but rather with terms such as Bible-believing, Baptist, or born again (Kidd, 2019). Evangelicalism focuses heavily on evangelism, the action of sharing the news of salvation with others (National Association of Evangelicals, n.d.). Evangelical Christians comprise approximately 25% of the total United States population (Zhou, 2023).

Evangelical Teachings

Evangelicalism, in alignment with broader Christian doctrine, views God as one in three persons: God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit (Kidd, 2019). It further emphasizes Jesus as role model and savior to humankind, who himself became human and was crucified as a sacrifice to satisfy God the Father's wrath toward humanity; this sacrifice is considered necessary for salvation to atone for humankind's sinful nature, deserving of eternal torment (Kidd, 2019). When an individual converts, they are said to become born again and to be redeemed through Jesus's sacrificial death – meaning that they will no longer go to hell upon their death, but will live forever in Heaven (Kidd, 2019). Evangelicalism is an interdenominational construct and, like the major branches of Christianity, holds a great deal of variety and differences in theology (Kidd, 2019). One example of this variety is the belief in the baptism of the Holy Spirit as a separate event from conversion, often involving receiving the gift of speaking in tongues; another point of disagreement is whether sufficient Christian faith leads to financial and personal gain, a belief system known as the prosperity gospel (Kidd, 2019).

Born Again. Of utmost importance in evangelicalism is the experience of being born again. This imagery comes from the New Testament and refers to a fundamental change from sinfulness to holiness (Miller, 2014). Evangelicals use the term born again to describe the conversion or salvation experience, which takes place upon belief in Jesus and acceptance of

Jesus's atonement for one's sin (Kidd, 2019). Endorsing the experience of being born again as a turning point and moment of establishing belief in Jesus is a primary identifier for evangelical Christians (Miller, 2014). Being born again involves a marked life change (Kidd, 2019).

Bible as Word of God. A second defining aspect of evangelicalism is its posture toward the Bible as its sacred text. Based in the Protestant concept of sola scriptura, the final authority of the Bible, the evangelical belief in the primacy and inerrancy of the Bible views the Bible as entirely true and entirely written by God (Kidd, 2019). Holding to biblical inerrancy and the supernatural preservation of the Bible across centuries and languages is considered a crucial belief in evangelical Christianity (Miller, 2014).

Personal Relationship through Holy Spirit. The third core tenet of evangelicalism is an intimate, personal relationship or "walk" with God, made accessible through the Holy Spirit (Kidd, 2019). This interaction with God can include singing songs of worship, praying, reflecting on the Bible, and remaining attuned to and expressive of one's Christian faith across all areas and moments of life. This personal relationship is described and perceived as direct communication with God (Zhou, 2023).

Gospel Propagation. One final hallmark of evangelicalism is evangelism, or the sharing of Christian teachings to convert others to Christianity (Zhou, 2023). Evangelism may be expressed through minute social interactions or large-scale missions around the world; it involves sharing the tenets of Christianity and inviting others to become born again. Witnessing, sharing the gospel, proselytizing, and evangelizing all refer to the imparting of Christian values (Buda, 2021).

Evangelicalism in Culture

Intertwined with this distinctive doctrine is evangelicalism's unique engagement with culture. Responding to a societal shift away from white supremacy and toward desegregation, feminism, sexual freedom, and gay and lesbian rights, evangelical Southern Baptist pastor Jerry Falwell formed the short-lived but impactful Moral Majority in 1979 (Anderson, 2015; Zhou, 2023). This was a political group which mobilized evangelical Christians to oppose contraception, abortion, same-sex marriage, and women's liberation by framing this liberalization as unbiblical and as a threat to the traditional American family (Anderson, 2015; Banwart, 2013). Evangelicalism is closely linked with the United States Republican Party and with Christian nationalism, endorsing an integration of Christian identity and American identity (Zhou, 2023).

These shifts in evangelical focus gave rise to the purity movement or purity culture, a phenomenon within evangelicalism focusing on sexual abstinence except within a monogamous, heterosexual marriage between a cisgender man and a cisgender woman (Moslener, 2015). This subculture ascribes the role of sexual gatekeeper to women, teaching them that it is their responsibility to keep men from committing sins of lust, adultery, or other forms of sexual immorality (Anderson, 2015). Wild (2021) found abstaining from premarital sex to be a criterion for acceptance in Christian families and communities. Evangelicals often instill these purity-focused values and parameters in adolescents and place high value on sexual morality.

As described above, evangelicalism is a widespread movement within Protestant Christianity characterized by large overlap with and key distinctions from other expressions of Christianity and other major religions. It focuses on individualized experiences of being born again and existing in consistent relationship and communication with God; it also highlights

religious community and outreach. This unique group continues to grow at unprecedented rates, while paradoxically seeing droves of evangelical Christians questioning, rethinking, shifting, and disaffiliating from their belief system (Pew Research Center, 2015). These patterns demonstrate the importance of understanding the deconstruction experience of evangelical Christians.

Religious Deconstruction

Having described evangelical Christianity and its origins and teachings, this literature review will now transition to a discussion of religious deconstruction to continue setting the stage for the present study on deconstructing evangelical Christian beliefs. The construct of religious deconstruction is broadly understood to refer to a taking apart and rebuilding of one's belief system – most often from evangelical Christianity (Choi, 2023). Manglos-Weber et al. (2024) portray religious deconstruction as involving shifts in spiritual practice. Deconstruction may be described as a form of micropolitics associated with personal awareness of tension and complexity in one's religious faith and one's cultural context, characterized by the following: rejection of institutions, movement toward ecumenism, challenging hierarchies, highlighting experimentation and creativity, and attempts to decrease shallowness, hypocrisy, rigidity, and right-wing politics (Marti & Ganiel, 2014). Herrington (2024) describes religious deconstruction as an individualized and personal experience involving complex interplay between one's social location, experiences of religious trauma, and spiritual identity.

Deconstruction can include significant losses, leading to experiences of grief, and is often an intensely vulnerable process (Herrington, 2024). Religious deconstruction may be considered developmentally appropriate and integral to the formation of one's spiritual identity and can be intensely liberating. For some, though not for all, religious deconstruction leads to the end result of deconversion (Herrington, 2024). The term *exvangelical* refers to those who formerly aligned

with evangelicalism and no longer identify as evangelicals, often for reasons of distress about evangelical teachings, beliefs, culture, or practice (Gull, 2022). Herrington (2024) states that most who navigate deconstruction do not perceive the process as a choice, but rather as a realization of one's belief unraveling and feeling unstable.

Population Characteristics

Little is known about the population characteristics of those who deconstruct their previously held religious beliefs. Some literature indicates that younger generations, members of minoritized groups, and those who are highly committed to their faith may be more likely to engage in deconstruction or disaffiliation or to experience distress related to their evangelical beliefs. The researcher will compare these patterns with those that emerge in participants' backgrounds and deconstruction processes.

Younger Generations. The population of those who self-identify as deconstructing consists primarily of young adults and middle adults up to age 49 (The Deconstruction Network, 2020). The percentage of generation X and millennials who identify as evangelical has been declining steadily (Burleigh 2018; Smith et al., 2019), while a sustained trend has emerged in which each new generation decreases in Christian affiliation, attendance, and belief (Voas & Chavez, 2016). A 2020 survey by the Deconstruction Network found that 35% of those deconstructing were ages 18-29, 33% were 30-49, 13% were 50-64, and 3% were 65 or above. In contrast, of those who identified as evangelical, 17% were 18-29, 33% were 30-49, 29% were 50-65, and 20% were 65 or over.

Minoritized Groups. In addition to being in younger generations, many who deconstruct are members of minoritized groups, including Black, Indigenous, Hispanic, Asian and other people of color; disabled people; and queer and trans people (Manglos-Weber et al., 2024).

Sexual minoritized groups are more likely to disaffiliate from Christian churches than straight or heterosexual people (Scheitle & Wolf, 2017); in fact, deconstruction may often begin with renegotiating one's sexual identity (Herrington, 2024). Women and queer men tend to describe more negative impacts of complementarianism, gender roles, and the teaching that it is women's responsibility to safeguard men's uncontrollable sexuality (Gull, 2022). LGBTQ+ members of religious communities may experience delays in their recognition of their sexual or gender identity due to low levels of exposure to LGBTQ+ people and topics (Vulakh, et al., 2023).

Highly Committed. Another characteristic of those who deconstruct may be their level of commitment to their faith. Criteria for being considered a highly committed Christian include holding the Bible as sacred and as ultimate authority on human and divine nature; considering one's beliefs impactful and meaningful to their lives as a whole; sensing deep unity and cohesion with their Christian community; and a critical stance toward modern culture (Visser-Vogel et al., 2012). Christians who demonstrate higher levels of commitment to their religion may have heightened religious distress and be more adversely affected by religious struggles (Verhoeff-Korpershoek et al., 2023). Those who identify as deconstructing demonstrated significantly more knowledge and familiarity with the Bible than those who identified with evangelicalism, mainline Protestantism, Catholicism, Mormonism, or other religious groups (The Deconstruction Network, 2020).

Deconstruction Precursors

The above section described characteristics of those who deconstruct their religious beliefs. In addition to these demographic qualities, existing literature has identified some distinct potential precursors that may contribute to or align with the onset of an individual's deconstruction. These may include disillusionment with evangelicalism, intellectual

dissatisfaction, and experiences of religious trauma or distress. The following section identifies and discusses these potential precursors to religious deconstruction.

Disillusionment with Evangelicalism. Intense questioning of one's faith can be connected to a sense of disillusionment toward one's religious institution (Jankowski et al., 2023). Deconstruction may begin with dissatisfaction with Christian endorsement of social harm, such as the church's historical defense or acceptance of slavery, the Holocaust, segregation, white supremacy, gender bias, misogyny, patriarchy, racism, colonialism, corruption, homophobia, transphobia, white saviorism, oppression of Black, Indigenous, Hispanic, Asian and other people of color, legalism, and nationalism (Johnson, 1976; Herrington, 2024). Many who disaffiliate from Christianity do so in response to perceiving harm within the church and perpetuated by the church, including purity culture, heteronormativity, and teachings about sexuality (Gull, 2022; Wild, 2021); specifically, questioning Christian teachings that condemn same-sex relationships often precedes religious deconstruction (Wild, 2021).

Many evangelical Christians began or accelerated their processes of deconstruction leading up to the 2016 election of Donald Trump; observing the vast evangelical support for Trump led to discomfort and dissonance when contrasting his political and personal leanings with biblical teachings about humility, love, and providing for the minoritized (Herrington, 2024). Awareness or experiences of sexual abuse in Christian communities may also be a precursor to deconstruction processes (Manglos-Weber et al., 2024). Observing church scandals and responding to cultural shifts may also contribute to the onset of deconstruction processes (Williams, 2023).

Relationship and identification with others whom the religion invalidates or rejects can lead to a distaste for one's religious doctrine and community and may be a precursor to

deconstruction (Herrington, 2024; Wild, 2021; Williams, 2023). In this regard, some who disaffiliate from their religious community recall an early sense of being different from their religious cohorts (Gull, 2022). Empathy for those experiencing discrimination and prejudice by one's religious community often precedes religious disaffiliation (Wild, 2021). Distress about the concepts of sin and hell, including the eternal torment of those who do not believe in Jesus, may also be a precursor to deconstruction (Cole, 2023).

Intellectual Dissatisfaction. Another experience closely associated with religious deconstruction is a sense of intellectual dissatisfaction. Doubts, disagreement with church doctrine, questioning beliefs, and engagement in intellectual exploration may promote deconstruction (Williams, 2023). Wild (2021) found that American millennials who disaffiliated from Christianity first experienced dissatisfaction with their belief system. This dissatisfaction is sometimes related to intellectual conflict, as people experience exposure to others with different belief systems and struggle to find or articulate rational and coherent justifications for their beliefs (2021). The Deconstruction Network (2020) found that 95% of those currently deconstructing their Christian beliefs found that their faith failed to answer important questions satisfactorily.

This intellectual doubt can be considered a normative developmental stage. Independence of thought, body, and behavior can be a precursor to deconstruction and disaffiliation (Thiessen & Wilkins-Laflamme, 2017). Prior to deconstruction, many people experience a naïve and externally constructed spirituality (Gull, 2022); religious deconstruction may be prompted by a desire for authenticity and spiritual growth (Williams, 2023). Examining the underpinnings and outcomes of one's evangelical beliefs may be a developmentally appropriate experience and can prompt cognitive dissonance and distress.

Religious Trauma and Distress. A majority of those who deconstruct or disaffiliate from their religious beliefs do so in response to distress, known in research as negative religious coping, religious trauma, spiritual struggle, and other related terms representing the concept of psychological distress specific to religious contexts (Downie, 2022; Verhoeff-Korpershoek et al., 2022). Common religious struggles, including doubt, shame, perception of God's punishment, and interpersonal difficulties in religious communities, decrease overall wellbeing (Verhoeff-Korpershoek et al., 2022). Individuals who disaffiliate from Christianity often describe their religious experiences as traumatic, fear-inducing, abusive, and psychologically, emotionally, and socially damaging (Gull, 2022). Some spiritual struggles may be prompted by trauma, illness, the COVID-19 pandemic, natural disaster, personal perceived transgressions, climate change, and war (Exline, 2022; Williams, 2023).

Views of God as judgmental, punitive, and unresponsive contribute to maladaptive coping (Ellison & Lee, 2009). Exposure to teachings around human depravity and sinfulness, which view human suffering as necessitated by human sin, can promote self-reinforcing shame (Arel, 2016; Hall & Hill, 2019). Individuals with high levels of commitment to their faith may experience more severe distress around religious struggles (Verhoeff-Korpershoek, et al., 2022). Teachings about human depravity may cause psychological distress as they emphasize the inherently evil nature of the individual and the immense pressure of avoiding eternal torture (Winell, 2011).

Deconstruction Processes

The above section described potential precursors contributing to the onset of religious deconstruction. Following this onset, little is known about any specific stages, processes, or themes inherent to religious deconstruction. Williams (2023, para. 2) likens deconstruction to

"taking apart a complex puzzle to understand how it works before putting it back together." The Deconstruction Network theorizes that religious deconstruction involves questioning one's faith tradition's core values; finding the faith tradition unable to address questions satisfactorily; changing some core beliefs; and a result of decreased certainty or rigidity around religion (2020). This section describes potential components of the religious deconstruction process and major themes in existing literature around deconstruction.

Doubts and Dissonance. Doubt or questions about one's Christian faith is generally recognized as integral to the religious deconstruction process (The Deconstruction Network, 2020). Gull's (2022) model of religious disaffiliation begins with doubts and an acknowledgement of dissonance regarding one's faith, often based in exposure to other belief systems, negative experiences in church, or questions about specific teachings. Experiencing religious doubts and struggles tends to involve anxiety, depression, isolation, shame, and anger (Campbell, 2020). Acknowledging doubts and articulating them to select others often involves feelings of loss and grief (Gull, 2022). Beginning stages of religious deconstruction may involve the destruction of one's religious identity (Gull, 2022).

Shifting Beliefs. The work of deconstruction also involves renegotiating previously held beliefs (Campbell, 2020). Ninety-five percent of those deconstructing their beliefs stated that they had to change beliefs they held passionately (The Deconstruction Network, 2020). Often, the troubling or incongruent beliefs have to do with suffering (Campbell, 2020). Following an acknowledgement of dissonance, exploration involves seeking out options for a new identity, whether within the same religion, outside of one's original religious belief system, or outside of religion entirely (Gull, 2022). A major change in the deconstruction process is a broadening or expansion of one's perspective on God and faith (Campbell, 2020).

Shifts in religious beliefs necessitate redefining one's relationships, often involving separation from one's religious community, strained family relationships, and difficulty finding a new sense of belonging (Gull, 2022). Moving through the deconstruction process involves intersecting identities and restructuring a sense of self (Gull, 2022). After deconstructing incongruent beliefs, people form beliefs that are brand new or that have shifted significantly from their original belief system, resulting in a belief system that is more congruent with their experiences (Campbell, 2020). Many people who deconstruct their religious beliefs, in doing so, reject the separation of born again or "saved" people versus not born again or "unsaved" people (Gull, 2022, pp. 73-74). Deconstruction often involves rejecting characterizations of God as angry and jealous (Gull, 2022).

Shifting Practices. Changes in lifestyle, ritual, and spiritual practice may commonly accompany religious deconstruction (Herrington, 2024). These shifts often move from a focus on prayer, Bible-reading, and personal devotion, toward adopting activism and justice practices as part of their faith commitments (Manglos-Weber et al., 2024). Deconstruction may include broadening one's conceptualization of spirituality to include practices based in bodywork, nature, and social engagement. Shifts in practice tend to move from more rigidity to more flexibility and openness (Manglos-Weber et al., 2024).

Reconstruction. Reconstructing one's identity is associated with increased wellbeing and self-esteem (Nica, 2020). A sense of hope and empowerment instills confidence in one's ability to continue to grow and navigate difficulties (Campbell, 2020). Following reconstruction, people engage more freely in relationships (Campbell, 2020). People hold their belief system less rigidly and are more comfortable with unanswered questions following the deconstruction process (Campbell, 2020). Many who deconstruct their beliefs arrive at a more sophisticated sense of

spiritual autonomy (Gull, 2022). Some who question their beliefs eventually dissolve their Christian identity status (Manglos-Weber et al., 2024).

Mental Health Implications of Religious Deconstruction

The above sections describe what is known or theorized about religious deconstruction. The processes involved in deconstructing previously held evangelical Christian beliefs appear to have impactful and extensive effects on individuals' mental health and their relationships with themselves and with others. This section describes potential psychosocial implications of religious deconstruction.

Intrapersonal Impacts of Deconstruction

Research indicates that experiencing religious doubt can decrease overall wellness (Upenieks, 2021), including experiences of anger, confusion, and shame (Exline & Rose, 2005; Ellison & Lee, 2010; Albertsen et al. 2006). Individuals who experience doubts tend to grapple with them and work toward their resolution (Patrick & Henrie, 2015); mental health outcomes depend on the way these processes unfold (Upenieks, 2021). Those who change their religious beliefs often experience minoritization and rejection (Wild, 2021). Those who wrestle with their beliefs also experience an increase in self-actualization, congruence, relief, and clarity as cognitive dissonance and obligation decrease (Wild, 2021). Upenieks (2021) found that a sense of meaning reduced risk for detrimental effects on mental health for those who experienced religious doubts.

For those who exit their religious community, transitioning out of one's religious belief system can involve feelings of anxiety, fear, grief, and anger (Adam, 2009). The disaffiliation process can involve a shift in the meaning-making process, in which conscience, values, evidence, and critical thought emerge as contributors to deciding what is true (Wild, 2021).

Those who deconstruct their beliefs also experience an increase in self-actualization, congruence, relief, and clarity as cognitive dissonance and obligation decrease (Wild, 2021). Some individuals maintain a largely unchanged faith, while drastically decreasing engagement and commitment to their religious community or practice. (Davie, 1990). After disaffiliating from Christianity, individuals often experience guilt and cognitive dissonance regarding their previous treatment of non-Christian groups, necessitating a reinterpretation and redemption of previous identity, beliefs, and actions (Gull, 2022).

Those who disaffiliate from their religion still tend to maintain higher levels of religiosity than those who never were affiliated with a religion (Beider, 2023). Loss of self-concept is often part of the exiting process, though the reconstruction process involves rebuilding a more congruent sense of self and experiences of liberation (Nica, 2020). Deconstructing beliefs can also involve a sense of harmony, solidarity, and belonging with the earth and with nature (Gull, 2022). Though disaffiliation is a painful process, much of the suffering it holds is related to other people's rejection and shaming of the disaffiliated individual; the suffering involved in the intrapersonal process of disaffiliation can hold meaning and enrichment (Björkmark et al., 2021).

Social Impacts of Deconstruction

Religious participation is inherently social (Voas & Crockett, 2005), leading to significant social impacts of religious deconstruction (Gull, 2022). Deconstruction processes are highly discouraged in high-demand religious communities and have grave social repercussions. Christian churches communicate that God desires high religious activity from people and that communal religious practice is important for expressing and increasing faith (Voas & Crockett, 2005). Religious communities view a lack of participation as an indication of overall disbelief or of disbelief in God's importance or care about their behavior (Voas & Crockett, 2005). For those

who disaffiliate from their religious beliefs or community, psychological and social wellness tend to decline significantly before they eventually improve (Nica, 2020). Many who identify as having deconstructed their beliefs express isolation and a desire for social connection (Herrington, 2024).

Wild (2021) found that some who deconstruct their religious beliefs avoid social ramifications of rejection and confrontation by concealing their new belief system – sometimes leading to a sense of guilt, fear, and dishonesty. Others choose to be open about their questioning and experience interpersonal conflict and rejection, leading to intense experiences of grief (Wild, 2021). Disaffiliating from one's religious community can have devastating interpersonal effects, including a loss of important relationships and one's senses of security and belonging (Adam, 2009).

The Deconstruction Network (2020) found that 23% of individuals who self-identified as deconstructing their Christian beliefs still attended church weekly, though men still attended at twice the rates of women. Those deconstructing their beliefs reported 400% more discomfort in church than those who were not; however, men felt twice as comfortable as women in church (2020). Comfort in church was negatively correlated with age, with older groups reporting more discomfort in church than younger groups (2020). Those in the deconstruction process typically do not feel they can express their beliefs to others in their church communities; younger people feel less comfortable sharing about their deconstruction process than older people (2020). Knight, et al. (2019) found that those who disaffiliated from their religion expressed a need for supportive and relationally informed therapy.

Mental Health Community Responses to Deconstruction

Despite these complex and encompassing mental health impacts, no guidelines exist for therapeutic interventions for deconstructing or deconstructed individuals. Broadly, counselors are encouraged to seek competency in the area of religion and spirituality as a component of multicultural competence (Vieten et al., 2016); this may be pursued through counselor self-awareness and respect for diverse expressions of spirituality (Post & Wade, 2009). Some counseling interventions for spiritual struggles include spiritual autobiographies, normalizing spiritual struggles, exploring client conceptualizations of God and other religious constructs, practicing lovingkindness meditations, and verbally processing and expressing spiritual struggles (Gear et al., 2009). Other interventions include prescribing two-way journaling to God and using metaphor to explore images of God (Murray-Swank & Pargament, 2005).

Christian counseling commonly addresses spiritual struggles but does not have established practices or guidelines for working with deconstructing or deconstructed clients (Prout et al., 2021). The Association of Christian Counselors offers broad guidelines for "licensed counselors, pastors, pastoral counselors, life coaches, lay counselors, and mental health coaches" (2023, p. 7), including upholding the superior authority of the Bible, encouraging biblically-prescribed behaviors, fostering new Christian counselors and leaders, promoting biblical laws, policies, and government, and challenging non-bibilical elements of culture (2023). In addressing spiritual struggles, Christian counseling centers the person of Jesus and the Bible (Tan, 2022). Christian mental health counselors rely on prayer to guide their intervention, work to discern whether spiritual warfare or demonic possession is taking place, depend on the influence of the Holy Spirit on the therapist, and focus on increasing spiritual resources to overcome distress (Tan, 2022).

Conclusion

Religious deconstruction is growing in prevalence and is largely misunderstood and misrepresented by media platforms and prominent leaders in evangelical communities (The Deconstruction Network, 2020). This study aims to fill a gap in literature regarding the process of deconstructing religious beliefs. The study will be rooted in constructivism and deconstructionism and will use constructivist grounded theory methodology to co-construct a theory of religious deconstruction with participants based on emerging patterns, themes, and constructs. This study will have implications for research and mental health treatment.

Definitions of Key Terms

Constructivist grounded theory: a qualitative research methodology focused on constructing theory based on patterns emerging from data – acknowledges researcher subjectivity and uses methods such as coding, memo-writing, and theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2014, p. 342)

Evangelicalism: A trans-denominational movement of Protestant Christians emphasizing the experience of being born again; the supernatural preservation and inerrancy of the Bible; and personal, individual relationship with Jesus (Kidd, 2019)

Religion: commitment to a supernatural power that is expressed through ritual and celebration, both individually and in the context of a faith community (Bryant, 2007).

Religious deconstruction: a process of questioning core tenets of one's beliefs, altering their belief system, and decreasing religious rigidity and fundamentalism (The Deconstruction Network, 2020)

Religious doubt: a hesitant reaction, a temporary and divided state of mind created by conflicting beliefs or inconsistency between belief and experience (Puffer et al., 2008)

Chapter II: Methodology

This chapter will provide an overview of the data collection process, including the research question, research design, methodological framework, population, selection criteria, and procedures for the study. This chapter describes methods for collecting and analyzing data, establishes epistemological frameworks and theoretical perspectives framing the research, and discusses researcher subjectivity and ethical and multicultural considerations.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to fill an existing gap in literature to understand the process of deconstructing evangelical Christian religious beliefs. This study aimed to support informed counselor education and mental health counseling for individuals with experiences of deconstructing evangelical Christian beliefs. To accomplish this, the study used the methodology of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) to develop a theoretical model of religious deconstruction based on participants' processes of deconstructing previously held evangelical Christian beliefs.

Research Question

In alignment with the purpose of this study, the research question aimed to create a model to describe the process of deconstructing evangelical Christian beliefs.

Research Question: What is the process of deconstructing evangelical Christian beliefs?

1. What factors contribute to the origins of the deconstruction process?
2. How do perceptions of self and others shift through the deconstruction process?
3. What stages make up the deconstruction process?
4. What challenges exist within the deconstruction process?
5. What benefits are derived from the deconstruction process?

Qualitative Research

The researcher selected a qualitative research method to address the above research question because qualitative inquiry allows for detailed descriptions of personalized meaning and subjective experience (Sullivan, 2017). Qualitative methodologies are often used when researchers seek to understand a phenomenon or process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researchers employing qualitative methods may follow new ideas and pursue alternate research questions during a study, even late in the process (Charmaz, 2014), allowing researchers to maintain a flexible approach and to alter their course when exploring a subject. Interpretive qualitative methods rely on the researcher to respectfully seek to understand participants' perspectives (Charmaz, 2014).

This qualitative research methodology aimed to explore participants' nuanced deconstruction processes in depth and to amplify the voices of those whose experiences have not been represented on large scales (Charmaz, 2014; CohenMiller & Boivin, 2021); qualitative inquiry can also promote inclusivity by increasing awareness of varied perspectives and practices (CohenMiller & Boivin, 2021). This study used a qualitative methodology because little is known about the process of religious deconstruction and the unique experience of deconstructing evangelical Christian beliefs and to allow for the exploration of participants' deconstruction processes in rich detail.

Epistemological Frameworks and Theoretical Perspectives

When engaging with qualitative research, it is imperative to understand the researcher's epistemological and theoretical frameworks. Epistemology relates to the origins and nature of knowledge; the epistemological foundation of a study profoundly impacts the research and should be clearly identified as framing the overall research design (Darlaston-Jones, 2007). In

this section, the researcher introduces constructivism as the epistemological framework for this study and then introduces deconstructionism as the research's theoretical framework. These two philosophical perspectives guided and framed the research design and methodology.

Constructivism

The epistemological framework for this study was constructivism, which views knowledge as subjective, relative, and shaped by the meaning individuals assign to their experiences within their social context. Constructivism emphasizes the co-construction of reality in social interaction (Charmaz, 2014). In research, constructivism assumes that the researcher and participants join in co-constructing knowledge (Abes, 2009). Constructivist research emphasizes social and cultural context, identity, and background as shaping interpretation of one's experiences (Jones et al., 2014). Constructivism also allows and encourages the researcher to acknowledge their own positionality and validate the subjective and nuanced nature of participants' deconstruction processes. A related framework, constructionism, similarly considers truth to be created, rather than discovered, and to be constructed within and through social interactions (Schwandt, 2003).

This study applied constructivist principles to develop a framework for understanding religious beliefs and practices. Because religion cannot be fully differentiated from its cultural, historical, or social context (Nye, 2008), this study approached religious deconstruction from an understanding of religion as an individual, social, and cultural construction within its specific context. The present study explored how power, language, and socialization influence the construction of religious meaning.

Deconstructionism

The theoretical framework for this study was deconstructionism. Jacques Derrida (1967) introduced the concept of deconstruction as the uncovering of dichotomous, hierarchical conflicts. This philosophical theory involved rejections of absolutism and embracing complexity, nuance, gray areas (Herrington, 2024). Derrida's framework of deconstruction has applications for institutional and social hierarchies and for unlearning previously held notions (Lurcza, 2014). Deconstructionist approaches critically analyze concepts of origin and essence and uncover the fallacies within systems based on authority and dominance, sameness and difference, and self and other (Brons, 2015; Lurcza, 2014). Deconstructionist, postmodernist approaches to institutions, frameworks, or systems involves a rethinking of rigid definitions and traditional conceptualizations (Lurcza, 2014). The term "deconstruction" has been applied specifically to breaking down and rebuilding one's worldview, especially in the context of religion (Onishi, 2019). Derrida's framework of deconstruction views the deconstruction process as individualized and not formulaic, supporting a view of religious deconstruction as personal and idiosyncratic (Herrington, 2024).

This study applied deconstructionist principles to understand the deconstruction of metanarratives within religious traditions that claim universal truths or absolute meanings. Deconstructionism has applications for critically approaching binary oppositions and hierarchies and can provide a framework for questioning dichotomies and structures within religious discourses. Deconstructing religion may involve analyzing assumptions underlying religious beliefs and practices and exposing contradictions, ambiguities, and tensions, challenging essentialist notions of religious identity and authenticity.

By incorporating both constructivist and deconstructionist approaches, this study aimed to provide a comprehensive analysis of religious deconstruction. This exploration considered both the processes of meaning making and the scrutiny of established interpretations and structures within religious traditions. This study approached knowledge as an understanding through meaning making (Charmaz, 2014) based on participants' deconstruction processes in their rich and unique social context.

Methodology

The above section identified and described the theoretical framework of the study. This section will detail the methodology of the study, constructivist grounded theory, and its origins and procedures. Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss argued for generating theory from data in researching social phenomena (Glaser et al., 1968). Their methodology, termed grounded theory (GT), aims to produce a theory that is applicable to the subject matter by using themes that emerge through data collection to construct theory, rather than by applying an existing theory through logical deduction (Glaser et al., 1968). GT differs from other qualitative methods in its focus on generating conceptual categories or properties from data and applying comparative analysis to make predictions and generate theory (Charmaz, 2014 & Glaser et al., 1968). Over time, variations of Glaser and Strauss' (1968) methodology have emerged, including Glaserian Grounded Theory, Straussian Grounded Theory, and Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) (Charmaz, 2014; Stern, 1994). These GT methodologies, while distinct, share the hallmarks of constant comparison, concurrent data collection and analysis, theoretical sampling, and memo-writing (Charmaz, 2014).

Classic Grounded Theory

Glaser and Strauss' classic GT is a systematic approach to qualitative analysis aimed at generating abstract theories from data, especially to explain social processes (Charmaz, 2014). It includes continuous cycling between data collection and analysis to construct theory throughout the research process. This is accomplished through constantly comparing information, categories, and patterns (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). GT is inductive and develops categories and theories from data (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

In classic GT, researchers wait to conduct a literature review until the conclusion of the study to avoid being influenced by outside and irrelevant materials (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967); literature may be integrated during the theoretical sampling stage to support theory development and comparison with existing research and theory (Porr & Stern, 2021). Classic GT utilizes theoretical sampling techniques and does not aim to represent a whole population; rather, the researcher pursues their own comprehension and interpretation by seeking rich, nuanced detail of all relevant facets of the subject matter (Porr & Stern, 2021). Theory emergence in classic GT takes place when constant comparison and concurrent data collection and analysis reach a point of theory construction (Porr & Stern, 2021).

Straussian Grounded Theory

Strauss, having developed GT together with Glaser, eventually shifted his approach to GT to be more flexible and to highlight participant voices while maintaining awareness of the researcher's role in engaging with and shaping the emerging theory (Corbin, 2021). Strauss' GT focuses on openness and being guided by questions and concepts that emerge from data collection through interactions between researcher and participants (Corbin, 2021). Strauss viewed GT as a means of verification (Charmaz, 2014).

Straussian GT incorporates some technical variations in addition to these shifts in approach. Strauss viewed the literature review as an important part of the beginning of the research process to guide data collection (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Straussian GT employs more technical procedures and focuses less on emerging theory and constant comparison (Charmaz, 2014). Participant interviews and observations guide the research process, within the context of the interactions between research and participants (Corbin, 2021).

Constructivist Grounded Theory

Constructivist grounded theory builds upon GT strategies but shifts underlying assumptions about data, researcher and participant roles and relationships, and interpretation (Charmaz, 2021). CGT uses grounded theory's inductive and emergent strategies for developing theory grounded in data while rejecting the notion of an unbiased researcher and acknowledging that the person of the researcher influences data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Charmaz, 2014). The researcher's preconceptions and sociopolitical context interact with data, making researcher reflexivity essential to the whole research process (Charmaz, 2021).

CGT places heavy emphasis on researcher subjectivity and the need for continuous reflexivity and awareness of the self (Charmaz, 2014). Reflexivity involves reflection and transparency regarding the research process and the researcher's decision making; it also places the researcher in their social context and accounts for their cultural background. Reflexive practices demonstrate how the theory emerged throughout the research process, as well as the role of the researcher in theory construction (Charmaz, 2014).

The aim of CGT is to develop a theory based on data, with the goal of representing participants' unique perspectives by co-constructing theories from the data in partnership with participants (Charmaz, 2014). Co-constructing data in CGT involves recognizing the researcher

role in identifying and interpreting data in relationship with participants. Interviews in CGT are emergent interactions characterized by mutuality, exploration, and validation (Charmaz 2014; Charmaz, 2021). The interview is interpersonal in nature and incorporates exploration and validation of participants' deconstruction processes (Charmaz, 2014). The researcher focuses on entering participants' points of view and learning about the meanings they assign to their verbal expressions of their experiences. This co-construction relies fully on data and may be influenced by bias (Charmaz, 1996).

The concept of co-construction extends even to the literature review in CGT, recognizing the researcher's prior knowledge, critical engagement with existing research, and the relation of the study to other relevant works (Charmaz, 2014). CGT views the literature review as important for clarification, credibility, and providing background for the researcher's decision making and theory construction; completing the literature review early in the research process allows the researcher to position their work in context of other relevant literature (Charmaz, 2014). Charmaz (2014) emphasizes the necessity of revisiting and tailoring the literature review to suit the purpose of the specific manuscript. The early literature review in CGT lends itself to the dissertation process and its requirements.

In CGT, research questions both guide and are guided by data collection and analysis. During constant comparison, research questions may change based on data analysis and the emergence of more important questions (Charmaz, 2014). This flexibility allows research to adapt to emerging patterns and information. Similarly, the research problem guides the method(s) of data collection applied to the study (Charmaz, 2014).

Reflexivity

CGT highlights researcher reflexivity regarding their internal processes. This necessitates an ongoing process of examining one's own assumptions, beliefs, experiences, and disposition and how these inform research design, decision making, interactions with participants, and interpreting data (Charmaz, 2014). Reflexivity protects against the researcher's preconceived notions about the world in general and about the collected data having unchecked influence on analysis and coding (Charmaz, 2014). Caution regarding the use of language that implies causation or intention is a reflexive practice that can illuminate preconceptions and limit their influence on theory development (Charmaz, 2014). Other CGT strategies for maintaining reflexivity include reflective journaling throughout the research process and maintaining transparent notes (Charmaz, 2006).

The researcher identified CGT as the methodology for this study largely in response to the existing gap in literature. This framework allows and invites the researcher to acknowledge their own relationship to the subject matter and the ways this could influence the research process (Charmaz, 2014). Given that no existing theory described religious deconstruction and that related constructs of identity deconstruction and religious disaffiliation have been described using stage models, CGT seemed appropriate for this preliminary research regarding deconstructing religious beliefs. Firsthand accounts of deconstruction processes are critical in guiding this study and informing research, mental health treatment, and training related to this population. It is important to co-construct theory with participants because of the personal and experiential nature of the subject.

Researcher's Stance

According to CGT, the person of the researcher is assumed to influence the research process. The researcher in this study was a queer white person who was assigned female at birth, grew up in a fundamentalist Christian evangelical community, and experienced religious deconstruction as an emerging adult. From young childhood until emerging adulthood, they had been immersed in evangelicalism and relied heavily on prayer, the social support of their evangelical community, the hope of Heaven, and meaning making through the lens of suffering with Jesus as means of coping with distress, grief, mental health challenges, and isolation. They were viewed as a prominent leader in their evangelical community from adolescence through early adulthood, facilitating local youth programs, arts-based Christian evangelism, and many international mission trips.

The researcher's deconstruction process began with questions and frustration regarding specific religious teachings, including the nature of hell, the violence in the Bible, evangelical gender roles, and the condemnation of queer identities and relationships. The researcher did not perceive deconstruction as a path they chose, but as a process forced upon them by the incongruence they were experiencing. They felt profound despair and panic regarding their initial parting from evangelical beliefs, telling a friend, "I'm losing my best friend, Jesus." This deconstruction was not an isolated or contained process, but one that affected the researcher emotionally, vocationally, physically, cognitively, and socially. The researcher had taken evangelical teachings to heart regarding one's faith impacting every moment and facet of one's life, making deconstruction an all-encompassing loss. In their personal journal, the researcher described this time as living in "a perpetual tearing down, a destruction without a plan, driven by necessity" and wrote the following:

"Dear Great Artist,
I know you are good but I don't understand.
Your intent.
Our purpose.
Our responsibilities.
Your nature.
What is true.
What is good.
What the hell is this place and what am I to do with it?
I mean no disrespect but we are hurting and we don't know why"

The researcher reached out to evangelical supports, including faculty, mentors, and pastors to discuss their doubts and seek guidance. The researcher immersed themselves in literature regarding their perceived areas of incongruence and questioning, such as Sarah Ruden's *Paul Among the People: The Apostle Reinterpreted and Reimagined in His Own Time* (2010). As a measure of self-protection, the researcher hid their deconstruction from family and friends, as well as from their evangelical employers and academic institution. Many in the researcher's life did not have any idea about their deconstruction until the researcher came out as queer, at which point they assumed the researcher had shifted their beliefs and practices.

The researcher moved toward what they called "progressive" Christianity, in which they deviated from belief in the literal accuracy and supernatural preservation of the Bible. They soon endorsed universalism, the teaching that all humankind is redeemed through Jesus's atoning death and that no one is condemned to hell, whether or not they believe in Jesus and have a conversion experience. They also transitioned to a queer- and trans-affirming theology and rejected their previously held understandings of gender and gender roles. This time aligned with a deconstruction of previously held assumptions about minoritized communities and with an increase in social activism.

As a mental health counselor, the researcher has a clinical practice that focuses in large part on work related to spiritual and religious struggles, identity, trauma, and deconstruction. The researcher has studied the major global religions but has the most familiarity with Christianity. The researcher now maintains a spiritual practice based in embodiment practices, social engagement, and nature.

Researcher Bias

The researcher believes that Christian teachings have great potential for good and for harm. The researcher has previously published research on the psychological effects of Christian teachings about sin and hell and has provided clinical mental health counseling to many clients experiencing religious and spiritual struggles, distress, deconstruction, coping, and community engagement. The researcher believes that deconstructing religious beliefs is a multifaceted process influenced by social location, personal disposition, religious and spiritual history, values, and more. The researcher considers all processes of religious deconstruction valid and does not believe there is one correct or moral way to navigate or conclude this type of journey.

Procedures

Participants

In CGT, the number of participants or interviews cannot be determined during the planning stages of a study; rather, the emergent research questions, data analysis, and themes will inform the total number of participants and interviews (Charmaz, 2014). In this study, the researcher anticipated a total of around 10-15 participants and continuously reevaluated the data's sufficiency and saturation.

This study sought out participants who self-identified as having deconstructed their previously held evangelical Christian beliefs. Evangelical Christian beliefs were defined as

doctrine within any denomination or expression of Christianity that emphasizes having a personal relationship with Jesus, the Bible as literal and written by God, and the conversion experience of being born again (Kidd, 2019).

Participant Characteristics

There were 16 participants in this study. Twelve participants were female, two were male, one was genderqueer, and one was nonbinary. Participants' racial and ethnic identities included white, Italian, Irish, and Asian. Participants resided across the western, midwestern, northeastern, and southern regions of the United States. Participants were mainly in early or middle adulthood. In alignment with the open nature of the research, the participant Interest Form (Appendix A) included minimal demographic items. Because of this, little information was collected about participant characteristics, which will be discussed in the Limitations section of Chapter IV. However, based on information disclosed during interviews, participants varied in how long they had been members of evangelical churches, the age at which they began actively deconstructing their faith, which Christian denominations they had experience in, and their current religious and spiritual identities, beliefs, and practices. Participants either selected their own pseudonym or opted to have the researcher select one on their behalf.

Sampling

This study initially used purposive, criterion-based sampling to recruit participants. The researcher used Instagram and Facebook to recruit participants based on their alignment with inclusion criteria. Recruitment measures consisted of social media posts providing information about the study, its nature, and participation. The researcher used purposive sampling because the study did not seek to make broad generalizations, but to describe specific experiences relevant to the subject matter (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Yin, 2015).

Theoretical Sampling

Once the researcher compared data and began to define preliminary categories, they sought out additional data aligning with each category with the goal of further developing theory (Charmaz, 2014). Theoretical sampling is an abductive process that can serve to clarify categories, identify relationships between categories, and illuminate variations in processes (Charmaz, 2014). The researcher determined to continue constant comparison and theoretical sampling until the point of saturation, when no new properties of core theoretical categories emerged and when additional data did not add theoretical insight (Charmaz, 2014); at the point of theoretical saturation, once new patterns, categories, or stages no longer emerged from interviews, the researcher would discontinue collecting new data.

After initial purposive sampling, one new potential pattern emerged related to gender and men's emotional processes throughout religious deconstruction; the researcher engaged in a small amount of theoretical sampling by following up via email with the two men who had completed the Interest Form but who had not responded to the researcher's email about scheduling an interview. Additional data resulting from this theoretical sampling reflected the data that the researcher had already gathered and did not reveal any new themes or patterns, so the researcher discontinued recruitment at this stage.

Setting

Interviews took place via Zoom virtual video conferences. These interviews were recorded and the audio was transcribed by Zoom.

Data Collection

After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the researcher shared information about the study via Instagram and Facebook. This information included a link

to a Google Form containing a description of the study, an informed consent form, a demographics questionnaire, and contact information. Participants were selected based on their self-identification as having deconstructed previously held evangelical Christian beliefs.

Intensive Interviews

Interviewing is the most prominent data collection method within quantitative research as a whole, as well as within grounded theory methodologies (Charmaz, 2014). This study primarily used the CGT data collection technique of intensive interviewing, a semi-structured conversation exploring a participant's deconstruction process through open-ended questions to elicit detailed responses (Charmaz, 2014). In these semi-structured interviews, the researcher used an interview guide (Appendix B) with broad, open-ended questions and used reflections and follow-up questions as needed (Charmaz, 2006; Charmaz, 2014). The interview guide was made up of nonjudgmental, culturally humble questions structured to promote participant comfort and to elicit their perspective of their process of religious deconstruction (Charmaz, 2014).

Interviews took place via telecommunication. The researcher used these interviews to explore participants' deconstruction processes in depth and attempt to understand participants' perspectives (Charmaz, 2014). The interviews were interactional and flexible, allowing for the researcher to offer prompts that may deepen, hold, or shift the interview's focus. The researcher used language that emphasized participants' freedom to consent to or decline a given line of conversation and validated participants' experiences (Charmaz, 2014). The researcher followed up with participants via email and encouraged them to provide feedback on the emerging theory and its accuracy in reflecting their deconstruction processes.

The researcher reviewed interview transcripts for accuracy, made any needed corrections, and took notes about nonverbal communication and other observations. The researcher continued cyclically conducting interviews, reviewing transcriptions, coding, and member checking.

Data Analysis

Data analysis took place concurrently with data collection as the researcher co-constructed theory with the participants based on emerging themes and patterns. After the first set of interviews, the researcher used initial coding, during which they studied fragments of data and assigned names or labels to categorize and summarize data (Charmaz, 2014). During this initial coding, the researcher focused on finding similarities and differences within and between interviews (Charmaz, 2014). Following the initial coding stage, the researcher used axial coding to explore how initial codes related to one another and to note themes and phenomena that arose (Charmaz, 2014). Later, the researcher moved into focused coding, at which point they defined the most useful codes and tested the codes they identified against the data they collected (Charmaz, 2014). In focused coding, the researcher used the codes they identified to evaluate the directions of the study and make adjustments as needed (Charmaz, 2014). Finally, the researcher moved toward theoretical coding, during which stage they sorted and organized codes into a cohesive theoretical framework (Charmaz, 2014).

Trustworthiness

Throughout data collection and analysis, the researcher made efforts to promote the trustworthiness of the study. Trustworthiness in qualitative research incorporates credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morrow, 2005). Establishing trustworthiness in a study demonstrates the quality, transparency, and context of the research.

Credibility

The first component of trustworthiness is credibility. A study's credibility refers to its accuracy and reflection of reality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stahl & King, 2020). Strategies for promoting credibility include triangulation, bridling, member checking, and reflexive journaling.

Triangulation. Triangulation, one strategy for promoting credibility, is a process of comparison between data from varied sources and contexts (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). This study engaged participants from varied demographic backgrounds and varied denominations and communities within evangelical Christianity; this data source triangulation supported the researcher in identifying relevant patterns and reaching saturation.

Bridling. Bridling also supports credibility by continuously attending to the researcher's own assumptions through self-awareness, reflexivity, and openness (Stutey et al., 2020; Vagle, 2010). Bridling incorporates journaling about the researcher's preconceptions, recording their internal experience during each stage of the research process, and returning to the researcher's own journals and memos to create and review an audit trail of decision making (Vagle, 2010). The researcher engaged in bridling by drafting an initial bridling statement exploring their own preunderstandings of religious deconstruction. Throughout data collection and analysis, the researcher maintained a reflexive bridling journal reflecting on the researcher's assumptions, experiences with participants, engagement with data, and understanding of the subject matter to attend to the researcher's own internal processes (Stutey et al., 2020).

Member Checking. Member checking increased credibility by eliciting participant feedback and confirmation about the accuracy of the researcher's representation of participants' deconstruction processes. The researcher engaged in member checking via email by sending participants a written summary of preliminary findings and requesting feedback. Thirteen out of

the total 16 participants responded; these participants affirmed the accuracy and adequacy of the preliminary findings and highlighted some areas of importance. Several participants who provided feedback during member checking expressed appreciation for being involved in the study and indicated interest in reviewing the results.

Reflexive Journaling. Finally, reflexivity is critical for promoting credibility in CGT to maintain researcher self-awareness regarding their position, viewpoint, and role (Charmaz, 2014; Hays, 2020; Morrow, 2005). Reflexive journaling is a continuous process of examining the inter- and intrapersonal processes involved in data collection and analysis and clarifying the influence of the person of the researcher on each facet of the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

Transferability

A second component of trustworthiness, transferability refers to the applicability of the study to other contexts (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Practices to promote transferability include providing sufficient information about the researcher and the research context, processes, and participants to enable readers to determine how findings may transfer (Morrow, 2005). The researcher for this study promoted transferability by grounding the research in its social context and providing rich descriptions of participant demographics and data collection.

Dependability

A third means of increasing trustworthiness is dependability. Describing the research process in explicit detail and carefully tracking emerging research design through an audit trail of researcher notes promote dependability. The researcher maintained memoing, field notes, and transcripts to demonstrate the various steps of the study and their connections to one another (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). This practice included informal memoing in the form of free

writing or clustering throughout the research process, in addition to method of constant comparison to categorize data based on shared attributes (Charmaz, 2014).

Confirmability

A final component of trustworthiness is confirmability. To promote confirmability, the researcher aimed to represent the subject matter of the study rather than their own bias (Morrow, 2005). The researcher increased confirmability by managing their own subjectivity (Morrow, 2005). The researcher acknowledged that their personal experiences would influence their interpretation of data (Charmaz, 2014); assuming this, the researcher promoted confirmability by engaging in transparency and creating a detailed audit trail describing efforts to acknowledge and manage bias and personal opinion.

Ethical and Multicultural Considerations

In addition to promoting trustworthiness, the researcher was mindful of ethical research practices throughout the data collection and analysis processes. Ethical approaches to research must include respect for the personhood, autonomy, and capacity of participants (National Research Council, 2003). The study's informed consent included comprehensible information about known risks of harm (National Research Council, 2003), which primarily entailed potential emotional distress regarding the study's subject matter. The researcher protected participants' confidentiality by using secure digital platforms for data storage and analysis and through the use of pseudonyms and elimination of identifying information (National Research Council, 2003). Applying the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC) (Ratts et al., 2016) to research involves cultivating high levels of self-awareness coupled with knowledge of research participants' worldviews (Hays, 2020). In interviews and all other interactions with participants, the researcher affirmed the importance of the participant's views and attended to

their comfort level over their own agenda. The researcher also attempted to conclude the interview process in a positive manner, knowing that the content of the interviews may elicit distress.

Finally, to maintain a posture of cultural humility, the researcher applied person-centered principles to this constructivist grounded theory research as described by Pratt et al. (2023). This approach promotes the centrality of the individual's voice, honors the personhood of participants, advocates for vulnerable populations, and emphasize transparency, mutuality, empathy, flexibility, and collaboration (Pratt et al., 2023). To maintain a trauma-informed and culturally humble position, it is critical to ground qualitative interviewing and inquiry in historical structural forces and social construction and culture (CohenMiller & Boivin, 2022). The researcher engaged respectfully and authentically with participants and highlighted their autonomy and capacity to decline to answer a question or to remove themselves from the study and withdraw consent. The researcher took this research on with participants, rather than on the participants. The researcher maintained transparency in their approach and decision making and strove to provide a safe and sensitive environment (Pratt et al., 2023). The researcher engaged respectfully in conversations around intersectional identity and took care not to impose their values onto research participants with evaluative or judgmental feedback or statements. This study used accessible technology and informal language. Throughout the study, the researcher tried to neutralize their own power. The population of those with experiences of religious deconstruction is likely to have experienced psychological distress and social rejection (Wild, 2021), making researcher sensitivity key to avoiding harm to participants.

Conclusion

This study used a constructivist grounded theory approach to explore the process of deconstructing evangelical Christian beliefs. The frameworks supporting this research included constructivism and deconstructionism. This research acknowledged researcher subjectivity and focused on co-constructing theory with participants through intensive interviewing and analysis. The researcher maintained awareness of their own perspective and the impact of the study and aimed to accurately perceive and articulate participant perspectives. The goal of this research was to construct a theory of the deconstruction of evangelical Christian beliefs that is reflective of participant's religious deconstruction processes.

Chapter III: Findings

This study explored the process of deconstructing evangelical Christian beliefs using constructivist grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2014). This chapter presents the major themes and categories that emerged from the data collected; these include characteristics of the religious deconstruction process, shifts in belief and practice, and psychosocial dynamics related to religious deconstruction.

The researcher notes that the themes which emerged throughout this study were highly interconnected. Although the following findings are presented in a linear fashion by necessity, participant data highlighted the complex nature of religious deconstruction and the intricate way these categories influenced and related to one another. The backdrop of evangelicalism provided essential context for stages of change, religious shifts, relational development, and mental health dynamics – all of which interwove and coalesced into the process of religious deconstruction as participants critically analyzed and divested from oppressive binaries, hierarchies, and essentialism in their former environments and worldviews.

Nature of the Deconstruction Process

The details of participants' religious deconstruction processes were highly idiosyncratic and individualized. However, consistent characteristics of the overall deconstruction process emerged, including the importance of evangelical culture and related interpersonal patterns as critical social context framing the process of deconstruction. Some sequential patterns and approximate stages also emerged across participants' deconstruction processes. This section describes themes in the nature and culture of evangelicalism as the social context for deconstruction, the general sequence of deconstruction, and an overview of the stages of deconstruction.

Evangelicalism as Social Context

Participants highlighted patterns in their former evangelical communities as essential context framing their deconstruction; evangelical culture and interpersonal patterns influenced all aspects of religious deconstruction, including the timing and sequence by which participants deconstructed, major shifts participants navigated, participants' relationships and social support, and participants' mental health and sense of identity. Prominent themes within evangelicalism included harmful interpersonal patterns, systemic dehumanization, and sociopolitical manipulation. Ruth stated,

> I've also learned a lot more about, like, the history of how the church was created, and so many things that I was like, "Oh yeah, that's bullshit. Now, that's nice to know." For a lot of people, learning about the history and things can be – is, like, the way that they leave. But for me, I think I could have known all those things and still kind of "mental gymnastics" my way around it if I saw evidence that it was actually doing good, you know? But I'm a therapist as well, and I think that was a big part of it, too, because a lot of the people I was seeing – I work specifically with people around trauma – and just the same pattern I was seeing coming up for me within my therapy was also coming up for so many of the people that I was working with, that they were – when we would process and come down to things – that so much of it was the church. And that they were traumatized by the way that they were treated, the experiences they had. And it just challenged that idea of like, "It's just, you know, they're not perfect people," because I just felt like that would make sense if it's the minority. But, if it's a very consistent story … like, all of these

> people have this experience? This doesn't feel like just a one-off thing. This feels like it's baked into the structure and the expectations and the way that things are, like, supposed to be run. And so, I was like, "I don't think this is just a 'one person not being perfect' kind of thing."

This section will describe participants' perceptions of evangelical culture as the essential social context framing participants' deconstruction processes.

Attitudes toward Emotions and Mental Health

One pattern in evangelical spaces pertained to attitudes toward emotions and mental health. This included an emphasis on maintaining happiness, gratitude, and joy at all times; some participants described this rejection of difficult emotions as toxic positivity. Sophia recalled being taught, "If you just love God and follow his principles, you just cannot be unhappy. It's just impossible." Ruth stated,

> A really big one had to do with viewing emotions as negative or, like, a sign that you are doing something wrong or that you're sinning, right? So, especially being angry was so bad. You're never supposed to feel that way.

Participants' former evangelical communities treated expressions of sadness as indicators that the individual was not maintaining a biblical, eternal perspective; they treated expressions of grief as indicators that the person was not grateful for what they had; and they treated expressions of anger as indicators that the person was not being forgiving and was influenced by the devil. These rejections of emotions – both subtle and explicit – contributed to shame, anxiety, repression of pain around interpersonal harm, low self-trust, prolonged time in abusive situations, fears of demonic influence, and compulsive confession, prayer, and Bible reading. Danielle contrasted other denominations, which observe and embrace more seasonal tone shifts,

with evangelical churches' continuously upbeat tone: "Evangelicals are like, 'Jesus is alive, so we're happy all the fucking time!'"

Participants connected these rejections of emotion to patterns of spiritual bypassing in evangelicalism. For example, participants recalled church leaders minimizing their church-related interpersonal wounds. Saorsa felt pressured to find a silver lining in any situation because of the teaching that God would always take something meant for bad and turn it into something good. These pressures invalidated participant distress and restricted their access to the full spectrum of human emotion. Some participants had lost loved ones and were told that these individuals had died because God needed them in heaven; they were also encouraged not to grieve Christian loved ones because they would be reunited in the afterlife, which contributed to feeling isolated in their grief and further complicated experiences of losing loved ones who were not Christians. Participants identified overarching patterns of dismissing any normative emotions that did not align with evangelical emphases on joy, gratitude, and contentment.

These rejections of emotional experiences and expressions were also connected with negative attitudes toward mental health treatment. Some participants' families and churches disapproved of and even prohibited mental health counseling and psychiatric medication as supports for emotional or mental distress. While in evangelicalism, some participants were cautioned not to identify with or "claim" mental health conditions and to pray instead. Before Sarah began actively or consciously deconstructing, she reached out to her evangelical mom for support during a mental health crisis; her mom simply responded, "If you commit suicide, you go to hell." When some participants endorsed mental health struggles, they were accused of demon possession or disobedience to God. A lack of access to psychoeducation and mental health professionals maintained the evangelical community as participants' exclusive source of

support and delayed participants' development of agency, critical thought, trauma recovery and reprocessing, and self-compassion. This rejection of mental health treatment, in conjunction with rejections of emotional experiences and expressions, constituted one impactful facet of participants' evangelical social contexts.

Hypocrisy

Hypocrisy was another important facet of evangelical culture that emerged as context for participants' deconstruction processes. Participants stated that their former evangelical communities had appeared helpful from an outside perspective but were abusive and manipulative in reality. Kyle quipped, "Christians are very nice, but they're not kind." Ruth stated that even the limited good that her church did in the community was done as a public relations strategy with the goal of obtaining more church members. Jolie recalled their predominantly white, upper-middle class church treating those who attended their ministry's soup kitchen as below them; Jolie found that these ministries did not feel like "labor[s] of love," but ways to "earn brownie points in God's eyes." Sue's mom stated that it would be better for an orphaned child to be left in a dangerous situation than to be adopted by a gay couple. For Sue, this was one of the first major "cracks" in their worldview; Sue found the prioritization of rejecting gay relationships over children's physical and emotional safety – which was otherwise a core family value – to be nonsensical and wrong. Ruth highlighted that constantly building more temples was merely the means by which the LDS church maintained its nonprofit status. Kyle noted that churches in his area did not use masks or follow any social distancing practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants' observed a self-serving disregard for others' needs in contrast with the images their churches had cultivated, contributing to disillusionment, confusion, and frustration.

Many participants noted that highly regarded "super Christians" in their communities had turned them away and declined to provide support during difficult times. Sarah's evangelical family, who was very well off financially, declined to help her during a costly emergency with her child – instead saying that the most helpful thing they could do for Sarah and her child was to pray. Sarah felt betrayed and unloved following this event. Participants stated that church members' actions often were misaligned with their words about unconditional love; when participants rose to high levels of leadership within their evangelical communities, they found other evangelical leaders to be rude, abusive, and harmful. Some participants met nationally and internationally famous evangelical musicians, speakers, leaders, and pastors and found that they were cruel and dehumanizing in person and behind closed doors. Sarah recalled, "Being inside of this ministry that I had admired for years and read the books of the woman who created it – and seeing that there was so much viciousness … I was just, like, floored." Participants felt tension around these observations of hypocrisy and noticed that they called into question or nullified participants' senses of fulfilment, congruence, and idealism regarding their evangelical community membership; some also began to feel isolated in their genuine pursuit of a life of loving God and loving others. This interpersonal harm, under the guise of lovingkindness, contributed to the social context within and from which participants began their deconstruction processes.

Abuse of Control

The pervasive hypocrisy described above was related to patterns of evangelical leaders abusing their power and control. Many participants described their former churches' leaders as controlling, emotionally abusive, toxic, self-glorifying, and egotistical narcissists. Unethical behavior by church leadership included extramarital affairs, financial fraud, sexual harm to

adults and children, and pervasive corruption without accountability, which had at times led to church scandals and splits. Participants found that their evangelical churches presumed incompetence and expected that church members would be easily fooled by false explanations or cover-ups; Hannah found one such situation condescending, dumbfounding, and panic-inducing. Evangelical pastors discouraged participants from questioning church leadership or doctrine and encouraged them to adopt a childlike faith in order to please God.

Participants recalled pervasive control tactics used in their evangelical churches, including churches dictating members' social, financial, and political behaviors. Participants expressed frustration with the arbitrary manner in which specific denominations and churches created their own sets of rules and expectations around such behaviors as dancing, listening to music, and more, each labeling their set of rules as superior to others. Participants recalled normative and life-giving behaviors, such as questioning, sexual activity, critical thought, and self-expression, being deemed sinful by their churches. For many, this was a point of confusion, guilt, and frustration which hindered normative development.

Some participants described their evangelical communities as cults. Danielle once found an article containing a list of characteristics of cults and realized her church met 10 out of 11 criteria. Participants highlighted a rigid "us versus them" mentality, which considered non-evangelicals and non-Christians immoral and dangerous. Some participants who attended evangelical grade schools described their educations as subpar and their educators as unqualified and negligent, some even covering up instances of sexual abuse despite their status as mandatory reporters. Kyle noted that he had significant gaps in his knowledge due to his Christian education. Participants were not permitted to question what church leaders said, nor to question the evangelical understanding of God. Some participants were told not to associate with those

who were not evangelical or who were pro-choice. Ruth recalled her evangelical community weaponizing language rooted in psychology or counseling to justify unfair circumstances. Participants had not been allowed to determine their own beliefs and were told they would never find happiness outside of the church. These patterns severely restricted participants' inner and external resources, allowing evangelical churches to dominate narratives, enforce control, and mold participants' behaviors.

Participants described the evangelical movement as predatory and as a system of punishment. Some highlighted grooming patterns in evangelicalism, especially toward children and adolescents, which they connected to pedophilia and childhood sexual abuse. Participants connected intense control tactics to the hierarchical nature of the evangelical community, in which children were under their parents' authority; wives were under their husbands' authority; husbands were under their pastors' authority; and pastors were under God's authority. In this hierarchy, pastors and husbands took on the role of God's mouthpiece. Some participants also reflected on ways that high control religions and cults attracted and trapped people in crisis or in need of resources; they noted that, especially for marginalized groups, prayer, church attendance, and Bible reading were among the only coping skills they had available – and that evangelical churches sought to promote dependence on and investment in their congregations rather than focusing on uplifting and empowering minoritized community members. Participants felt controlled when their evangelical leaders and families monitored and regulated their financial, sexual, vocational, and social behavior; they found this invasive and exploitative by design. These power dynamics and control tactics contributed to covert and overt abuse in participants' former evangelical communities, as described in more detail in the next section.

Perpetuating Abuse

Participants' former evangelical communities allowed, perpetuated, and covered up abuse. This included victim blaming, keeping abusers in church congregations and leadership positions, and minimizing accountability and protective factors. Participants recalled an expectation in their evangelical communities to forgive those who harmed them with no resolution, repair, or safety measures. Ruth stated, "There's this kind of toxic forgiveness where it just really perpetuates abuse – where you're not supposed to ever express how you feel if it could possibly hurt someone's feelings, because that would be hurting Jesus in some way." Participants observed their church leaders instructing church members who were being abused at home to "turn the other cheek."

Marie, who was abused physically by her church's youth pastor as an adolescent, stated that he would hit her in front of adult church members who did not say or do anything; even her parents were aware of the abuse and took no steps to protect her. Danielle's childhood best friend in their church was abused by her brother for several years; when the friend's parents became aware, they did not take any action to stop the abuse and denied the friend's request for mental health counseling because their church elders deemed it unnecessary. Many participants found interactions with church leaders to be invalidating and emotionally abusive. Participants emphasized that these and other patterns of harm embedded within evangelical culture inhibited normative development, left vulnerable individuals unprotected, contributed to a sense of helplessness, and circumvented consequences for abusers.

Violations of Consent

Another expression of the controlling and abusive culture described above was the presence of violations of consent across facets of participants' evangelical communities.

Participants had been taught by church leaders not to respect people's boundaries or cultures in attempts to evangelize or hold church members accountable to church standards. Looking back, participants realized that missionary work they and their peers had engaged in was violating and rooted in a colonist mindset, aiming to eradicate someone else's culture and belief system by promoting assimilation to white, evangelical beliefs and behaviors. Participants also recalled instances of private information being shared without their permission, such as Jolie's mom outing them as gay to the whole church after secretly reading their journal. Participants listed other violations of consent, including men frequently putting their hands on their bodies without their permission to converse, pray, or engage in the practice of slaying in the spirit. Participants identified patterns of coercive control, power differentials, and exploitation which prohibited church members from freely consenting to interactions and behaviors.

Prejudice and Discrimination

Patterns of covert and overt prejudice and discrimination toward marginalized groups constituted another element of evangelical culture as context for participants' deconstruction processes. These included exclusionary attitudes and practices toward Black, Indigenous, Hispanic, Asian and other people of color; LGBTQIA+ people; and women. These patterns delayed processes of identity development, provided a framework for rejecting human rights causes, and promoted white-centric, heteronormative, and misogynist values; for many, prejudice and discrimination prompted feelings of disgust and served as a catalyst for active deconstruction.

Participants identified patterns of racism in their evangelical social contexts ranging from microaggressions to blatant dehumanization. Many highlighted the evangelical response to the Black Lives Matter movement as hypocritical, harmful, and not rooted in love or in the value of

human life. Participants described their evangelical communities as racially exclusive, often tokenizing one member of a racially or ethnically minoritized while encouraging church members to socialize only with other people in the church and only with others of their white demographic. Participants recalled their churches being all or predominantly white, even in racially and ethnically diverse areas. Will stated that he had received both subliminal and blatant messaging in his evangelical church that Black people were naturally violent. Participants recalled whiteness being treated as the "default" and the Bible being interpreted through white, European cultural values. Participants also noted that cultural appropriation had been at the heart of much of their churches' mission work. Participants felt anger, frustration, and regret as they reflected on racism in their former evangelical communities.

Participants also described homophobia, transphobia, and anti-LGBTQIA+ attitudes and actions in their former evangelical communities. Danielle came out to a trusted church leader and was told that her only options were to reconsider or to be celibate. Participants' former churches had not allowed or affirmed LGBTQIA+ relationships or permitted LGBTQIA+ individuals to hold any ministry positions. Participants described churches' policies regarding transgender people as dehumanizing and traumatizing, including not allowing a trans child to use the restroom without an adult standing by watching, nor to use their chosen or preferred name or pronouns. Some participants were punished or removed from their positions of leadership due to their support of gay marriage or their advocacy for transgender rights.

Participants also highlighted harmful and dismissive treatment of women in their former evangelical circles and churches. This included strict gender roles and rules, which limited acceptable behaviors, clothing, vocations, leadership positions, and characteristics for women. Some participants had been members of churches that did not permit women to vote in church

meetings, wear pants, or hold any church position that could be considered having authority over men. Some participants' churches regarded women as valuable only insofar as their capacity for having children or serving as a church leader's wife.

The expressions of prejudice and discrimination described above were connected with others, including ableism, fatphobia, xenophobia, ageism, and aporophobia. For example, Will's former evangelical church leaders claimed that all poor people were lazy and "just sitting on their asses." Participants found that these attitudes were irreconcilable with their personal value of human life. The biases described in this section contributed to the views of morality and disregard of privilege described in the next section.

Views of Morality

Participants noted that evangelicalism's rigid expectations did not account for an individual's level of privilege, traumatization, resources, or capacity in delineating moral or "righteous" behaviors. Ruth stated,

> Your ability to be perfect, or to meet of all those expectations, inevitably changes for all kinds of things not in your control. But that's not what I was taught, right? I was taught it should be within your control, and if you are just doing enough, then you know nothing bad's gonna happen, and everything will be fine, because you'll be being blessed. And so, this is something I probably am gonna have to grapple with for the rest of my life, I think, is that feeling of not being good enough and having my worth or my effort be measured by how things are going in my life, right? So, whether I feel happy or sad, or how my kids behave, or how things happen financially, or any of those things – it still feels like the immediate response for me is to internalize it and have it be my

> fault somehow. You know, like, I probably did something. … You shouldn't have to choose whether to pay your tithing or eat. That's ridiculous, right? Instead of seeing it as a measure of your faith or just a trial or something. It's like, actually, no, it's just systemic racism. Maybe we could do something about that.

Participants' evangelical communities emphasized that God was the only source of morality and was the only reason a person would not turn to murder, stealing, rape, and other harmful actions. Sue stated, "You would hear, like, a pastor be like, 'Oh man, I couldn't love my wife unless it was God loving through me.' And I'd be like, 'What the hell!' That's such a terrible thing to say." Arbitrary and problematic views of morality contributed to a culture of rigid and detrimental behavioral expectations, some of which will be described in more detail in the next section.

Purity Culture

Purity culture emerged as a specific facet of evangelical moral standards. Participants found purity culture and rape culture to be controlling, traumatizing, and oppressive, especially to women. This included regulations for clothing and a heavy emphasis on virginity and mental and physical purity. These rules and attitudes positioned women and girls as responsible for men's cognitions and behaviors, including lust, affairs, or sexual assault. Ruth recalled a message by one prophet that stated that he would rather his child die fighting off an attacker than survive a sexual assault and, thus, have lost their virtue. Discussing the stigma around sex in evangelicalism, Danielle recalled a pastor speaking from the pulpit about meeting his new grandchild for the first time and saying, "I remember meeting him and thinking, 'Well, aren't you just the cutest little bundle of sin?'" Ruth described an obsession in her former LDS

community about whether people were wearing their garments at all times. Sue was disowned by her mom when Sue moved in with her boyfriend.

Participants stated that they were undereducated and highly restricted regarding sex. Some participants wore purity rings or "True love waits" rings to symbolize their commitment not to engage in sex prior to marriage; for participants who were assigned female at birth, their sexuality was considered to be under their fathers' authority until it would be transferred to their husbands' authority. Some female participants were not permitted to talk to males as children and teenagers. Some participants felt confused about the emphasis on virginity and not being a sexual entity, contrasted with the expectation for immediate sexual activity upon being married. Participants recalled church lessons focused on physical purity, such as one comparing a nonvirgin to a piece of chewed up gum: ruined, contaminated, and undesirable. These teachings were objectifying and devastating to participants' self-concepts and instilled pressure, shame, and fear.

Participants connected purity culture with a broad conceptualization of the human body as sinful, evil, and untrustworthy. Participants recalled a chronic rejection of body awareness, physical pleasure, and bodily autonomy. Amy stated, "I was never taught that I was in charge of myself and in charge of my body." Will stated, "It's this built-in negative cognition of, like, 'I'm gross – I'm awful – I'm sinful and I can't trust my body. I can't trust my own intuition.' Like, all these things. I was like, 'These things are so harmful.'" Many participants noted that purity culture impacted those raised male and female in different ways. Kyle noted,

> There's a lot, lot, lot of information for women recovering from purity culture and there's very little for men. And, like, it's such a shame-based thing, I think,

> for men, because they're aware they're privileged. And yet, like, they're not – like, not in that sense. Like, everyone loses in purity culture.

Purity culture as a facet of evangelicalism had implications for controlling behavior, objectifying human bodies, and cultivating shame.

Political Attitudes and Actions

Finally, in framing their deconstruction processes, participants heavily emphasized the history of the evangelical movement and its relationship to and infiltration and manipulation of the United States government. This included the formation of the Moral Majority, the weaponization of issues to increase religious control, and the political actions and influence of the evangelical church throughout recent history. Participants highlighted the evangelical use of fear tactics to influence church members' voting, including covert and overt messaging – some churches even providing flyers with instructions on how to vote in an upcoming election. Participants recalled many instances in which their church communities and local government were interconnected and significantly influenced one another. Participants identified Christian nationalism, Zionism, and Christian fascism as immensely present in their former evangelical communities.

Most participants specifically highlighted the 2016 and 2024 United States presidential elections as critical context for their deconstruction journeys. Participants described Donald Trump as bullying, racist, sexist, ableist, and hypocritical. They were deeply troubled by the evangelical church's support of Donald Trump's campaign and presidency and its treatment of Christians who spoke out against him. Participants emphasized that he consistently and blatantly misused and abused God's name and yet was praised in evangelical spaces. Amy recalled being taught about the importance of the separation of church and state and finding that this did not

align with the evangelical community's support of Donald Trump's campaigns, even though he did not demonstrate Christian values or familiarity with the Bible; she found that this pushed her further and further away from the church. Danielle highlighted the hypocrisy of her evangelical family voting for Donald Trump, given their exposure to the harms of sexual assault. Amy said, "I was taught to hate Bill Clinton because of his morals and values. … I was literally taught, 'This is not what a leader should be; this is not what a president should be.'" Evangelical support of Donald Trump enraged and hurt participants, who saw it as highlighting the corrupted and oppressive nature of evangelicalism as a movement; for many, it also served as the impetus for their deconstruction. Because of this, evangelical politics constituted a critical component of the cultural context in which participants began their deconstruction processes.

The patterns described in this section demonstrate participants' perceptions of evangelicalism and the corresponding culture that served as the social context for their religious deconstruction processes. These patterns of invalidation, inauthenticity, abuse, control, and exclusion contributed to the environment within and from which participants deconstructed. Facets of evangelicalism as the context of religious deconstruction were interwoven with the contents of participants' deconstruction processes, including the major shifts in beliefs and practices described in the following section.

Sequence

Although consistent themes and patterns within religious deconstruction emerged, participants' deconstruction processes did not follow one formulaic sequence. Rather, participants moved through deconstruction in a non-linear fashion: piece by piece and at various points, to different extents, and at inconsistent speeds. These individual differences were influenced by participants' social contexts, inner resources, and social supports. Participants

varied in the factors that prompted their deconstruction, the order in which they shifted beliefs and practices, and the psychosocial dynamics associated with each stage of deconstruction.

Additionally, for most participants, the deconstruction of their religious beliefs was intertwined with their deconstruction of various interconnected oppressive systems. These systems included white supremacy, ableism, capitalism, misogyny, fatphobia, and patriarchy. Some participants likened deconstruction of their worldview to pulling at a loose thread on a sweater and finding that the whole sweater unraveled; once they applied critical thinking to one facet of oppression, their eyes opened to the connected fallacies and harmful patterns in others. Despite individual differences, the deconstruction process unfolded over three approximate stages, as discussed in the following section.

Participants were generally unaware of religious deconstruction before experiencing it themselves. Many did not have language for their deconstruction process until they encountered the term, often through social media. Amy stated, “I started exploring TikTok, you know, and having more of a name for what I was doing. Before that, I felt like I was the only person in the world doing that.” Participants found the term “deconstruction” and related social media content helpful and validating. In addition to social media, participants found books, podcasts, and other media helpful (Appendix C).

Approximate Stages

While participants described their deconstruction processes as varied and non-linear, certain consistent themes emerged that fit into three unique stages of deconstruction: latent or pre-deconstruction, acute deconstruction, and ongoing deconstruction.

Latent/Pre-Deconstruction

Participants' deconstruction processes began slowly and largely unconsciously during their time in evangelicalism. Prior to actively deconstructing, participants tended to be heavily involved in their evangelical communities, to be engaged in service and leadership, and to have been raised in highly religious families of origin. Years ago, at Sarah's Christian university, she was voted the senior "most likely to impact the Kingdom of God." Despite their commitment to their faith, most participants had a longstanding, underlying sense of cognitive dissonance and feeling that something was "off" with their evangelical communities and beliefs. Jolie recalled, "I started questioning from a young age, but I was still very much in the mindset of, like, 'This is right. This is the path I want to take.'" Similarly, Kyle stated,

> I was deeply in it. … I was on church council as an eighth grader; I was on church council again as, like, a 24-year-old. I was the vice president of our church council as, like, an adult at our big congregation. So, like, yeah, I think it's easier for people who are still in the church to be like, "Oh, they were never true believers." No, I was pretty deeply invested in it. I'd have these instances of skepticism, but my behaviors were to invest further always, not to pull back.

Participants engaged in "mental gymnastics" (Ruth) and the repression of numerous emotional and cognitive processes to navigate the misalignment they perceived with their evangelical beliefs and practices. Ruth stated,

> Prior to really giving myself permission to look at the questions I had or look at the things that didn't feel good to me, I would have said, "I've never struggled with this. I've never questioned anything. I've always been, like,

> 100% where I'm supposed to be." But the more that I have actually deconstructed and spent time processing things, the more that I can look back and see, oh, like, this has been going on. I've had those feelings since I was really young, actually, or moments where I felt like "This doesn't make sense," or "That doesn't feel right to me," or "Something seems wrong," or "I don't like this." And so, the process, I think it is a lifelong thing that I wouldn't have recognized it before.

Many participants noted that they did not have the sense of safety necessary to explore their beliefs at this stage, while some felt too fearful of hell, interpersonal rejection, or losing of a sense of security to move into acute deconstruction. Latent or pre-deconstruction spanned participants' time in evangelicalism – typically their entire upbringing and childhood – until the point at which they entered acute deconstruction.

Acute Deconstruction

In contrast with latent or pre-deconstruction, acute deconstruction involves a conscious renegotiation of beliefs and practices. For some participants, the onset of this stage felt like an involuntary eye-opening, at which point they realized they did not or could not hold their former beliefs any longer. Many reported an abrupt, rapid, and even explosive beginning to their acute deconstruction – a sudden crystallization after a slow buildup of cognitive dissonance over time. Participants did not set an intention to deconstruct, but found that deconstruction seemed to happen to them as they shifted from an unconscious process to one that was more intentional, active, and deliberate. Jolie stated,

> While I had been questioning and critically thinking about my faith before that, I think that was really the turning point of turning me away from any type of

> organized religion, was that, like, seeing hate where there should have been love.

Participants cited a variety of factors as prompting or contributing to the onset of their acute deconstruction. Some entered acute deconstruction after being exposed to people of diverse religious backgrounds and cultures; when Sarah moved out of her family home to attend college, she realized that her upbringing was far outside what most would consider normal. Others became intellectually dissatisfied with the teachings of the church or became aware of misalignment of evangelical teachings with their lived experiences. Some participants began to actively deconstruct after learning about the history and canonization process of the Bible. Many entered acute deconstruction prompted – at least in part – by evangelical conservativism and support of Donald Trump. Other common factors included increased critical thought and observation or experience of harm within the evangelical community.

As they entered acute deconstruction, some participants rapidly discontinued practices such as church attendance and prayer. Others leaned even more heavily into their faith in an attempt to sustain their evangelical beliefs and practices; this included socializing exclusively with Christians, attending Christian conferences, seeking church guidance, and attributing the dissonance they experienced to the imperfection of people within their evangelical communities rather than to any fallibility of the Bible or evangelical doctrine. These efforts sought to maintain or recapture a sense of belonging, hope, and order. Some participants shifted their focus to service – especially service to church youth – because it was laden with less pressure and felt more fulfilling than other means of church participation. Some participants became vocal within their evangelical circles about their changing beliefs, including affirming views of LGBTQIA+ and support for racial justice.

In addition to shifts in belief and practice, acute deconstruction also often involved a profound emotional upheaval, with many participants experiencing significant mental health challenges. This included a sharp increase in anxiety, panic, and hopelessness. Participants encountered intense relational loss and rejection, abruptly losing the sense of belonging and community they had been accustomed to in their evangelical circles and churches. For many participants, the rapid nature of their acute deconstruction and, thus, the rapid nature of the relational loss and rejection they experienced, contributed to their experience of deconstruction as challenging to their mental health. The inaccessibility of prior religious coping strategies also contributed to exacerbated mental health symptoms. Entering acute deconstruction tended to destabilize participants due to an abrupt loss of external resources and an underdeveloped constellation of inner resources. As participants moved through acute deconstruction, however, they reported an increase in both mental and relational health.

Following the onset of acute deconstruction, many participants initially moved from evangelicalism to what they identified as progressive Christianity. Danielle stated, “I was looking for a way to remain Christian and deconstruct the abusive, culty elements of my faith.” Common shifts in belief during this stage included a shift toward feminism, LGBTQIA+ affirming beliefs, rejecting gender roles and gendered depictions of God, believing the Bible to be non-literal and not supernaturally preserved through translation, and an emphasis on the teachings of Jesus and the overall narrative of God as love within the Bible. Common shifts in practice and identification included a shift away from conservative or Republican politics, an embracing of diversity, a sense of separation from evangelical culture, and a rejection of the label of “evangelical”.

As they navigated their changing beliefs and practices, some participants found it helpful to attend more traditional, liturgical, and structured churches, such as Episcopal, Anglican, or Catholic. Supportive factors in these spaces included predictability, decreased perceived pressure, the absence of verbal aggression or claims of demonic possession, and increased accountability for leadership. Some participants incorporated Buddhist, Pagan, and other beliefs and practices in an effort to find an expression of Christianity with which they were at peace and in which they could still believe. Most participants found this stage helpful, but not sustainable, saying that they eventually realized the progressive beliefs they were developing could not coexist with their existing religious framework. Kyle stated,

> I went through a phase of, like, "Right, like, Paul says to meet people where they're at. I can do that. Jesus says to love everyone. I can do that. Like, I'm on board." But, like, I was really just picking and choosing and ignoring everything else really conveniently … When I look back, I know, like, I was trying to fix it from the inside … It was like, people I care about are being hurt by this, and, like, I want to be better than that. But I didn't really have the ability to, like, step outside it and be like, "No, the system's not broken. The system is working how it was designed to. You just don't like the system."

Acute deconstruction ended much less abruptly than it began. Participants' senses of distress and upheaval dissipated over time as their deconstruction processes became less urgent and disruptive. Participants reconstructed and settled into new patterns of belief and practice and exited acute deconstruction over time, moving into ongoing deconstruction.

Ongoing Deconstruction

While most participants identified a transition out of acute deconstruction and a settling on renegotiated beliefs and practices, they noted that their deconstruction processes continued over time as they and their psychosocial worlds developed. One participant likened deconstruction to a spiral staircase, noting that they continued learning, unlearning, and growing within similar topics on new levels as they continued to evolve. Lillie stated, "I think about, you know, spiral learning theory. The idea of, you know … you just keep on learning, but you learn at a new level. And I think that's what's happening to me." Participants described ongoing deconstruction as lasting years or decades, many anticipating being engaged in some level of deconstructing for the rest of their lives because they had been raised in, committed to, and immersed in evangelicalism during their formative developmental years.

This ongoing deconstruction tended to involve social domains and embodied learning rather than drastically shifting beliefs and practices. Participants continued to deconstruct beliefs, challenge internalized biases, and reframe practices both narrowly and broadly as they arose organically in alignment with their personal development. Life transitions, global events, and other stimuli prompted participants to return and explore remnants or facets of evangelicalism that had thus far gone unanalyzed. Even having deconstructed on an intellectual level, participants navigated a slower process of uncoupling from beliefs held in the body and in internalized and unconscious biases. Kyle stated,

> I'm a therapist. So, I went back to school and, like, studied religious trauma and did all the, like, "Let me intellectualize my process so I understand what happened." But, like, it was a long process, and I think it's – you know, I talk about the difference between, like, deconverting and deconstruction.

> Deconstruction sort of has this idea of, "I don't believe that stuff anymore." But then, like, the deconversion process is like getting some of that old shit out – like, I don't ascribe to purity culture; that doesn't mean that, like, my brain doesn't, like, trigger on a shame response with something that I was raised to think is shameful. So, like, I'm aware that some of that stuff's still in there, even though I work with it regularly, and I help other people through it, and, like, I swim in those waters a lot. But, like, right, my brain and my body don't operate any different than anyone else's. So, it's just sort of like I've intellectually left the church very much, and, like, advocate against it, and also, some of that stuff's still in there.

Participants found ongoing deconstruction comfortable, freeing, fulfilling, and non-threatening as compared with earlier stages. They reported improved mental and relational health, as well as increases in autonomy, peace, and care for self and others. Most endorsed some lingering distress – although greatly diminished – related to evangelical teachings, relational patterns, and culture. Through ongoing deconstruction, participants reconstructed and integrated their shifted beliefs and practices, attended to their mental health, and cultivated more congruent social contexts.

Within and across the stages described in this section, participants dismantled elements of evangelical culture, beliefs, and practices, finding these shifts impactful to their inter- and intrapersonal lives. While some moments of deconstruction held more distress and others held more relief, participants found even the difficult components of deconstruction to be productive and meaningful parts of their psychosocial recovery from restrictive and incongruent patterns.

The following section describes major themes in the doctrinal, behavioral, and cognitive shifts participants traversed as they dismantled their evangelical worldviews.

Shifts in Belief and Practice

The above sections described the general structure and unique social context of participants' religious deconstruction processes. This section will identify significant themes that emerged in the contents of renegotiated beliefs and practices. Participants varied in how they incorporated specific shifts into their deconstruction journeys and in the meaning they made of these changing beliefs, roles, and behaviors. Major shifts were connected with deeper development in participants' senses of identity and agency, including changes in evangelical doctrine, expressions of religion and spirituality, and social roles and rules.

Shifts in Belief about God

Beliefs about God underwent substantial changes for all participants. During latent or pre-deconstruction, many participants viewed God as angry, distant, punishing, and scary. Many also characterized God as a disappointed and emotionally unavailable parent, always looking through their thoughts and actions for something they were doing wrong. Participants found it difficult to reconcile God's judgment and the violence described in the Bible with God's love and mercy. Celeste stated, "On this hand, you have an all-loving God, and on this hand, you have a God who created and sends people to hell. Those two things don't line up; that's sadistic, and that's loving." Some participants recalled the tension of believing that they could pray and receive God's help, but that God was also ready and willing to discipline them. Many had struggled to understand why God answered some prayers and not others. Throughout their upbringings, participants found that God was both a source of comfort and of pain. Despite this

tension and cognitive dissonance, participants held to the belief that God was perfect and that any distress they felt had to be the result of misunderstanding of or misalignment with God.

Some participants' beliefs about God dissipated rapidly upon entering acute deconstruction as they realized they no longer believed in the Christian God at all. In contrast, other participants' beliefs about God shifted throughout their deconstruction process. Some participants found exposure to diverse images of God to be helpful as they rejected the evangelical image of God as a white, American, thin, cisgender man. Many started to believe that God could be outside of gender, race, and other social constructs; they began to picture God as multiple genders and races, to seek representations of God in nature, and to use a variety of pronouns to refer to God. Danielle realized, "Oh, I've been taught, like, this very narrow sliver, and often incorrect, piece of God." Many participants entered a stage of narrowing down their beliefs to the core tenet of "God is love" and rebuilding their faith from that point. Refocusing on the concept of love was more aligned with participants' values and eased some of their felt discomfort around evangelical attitudes, doctrine, and expectations.

In revising their beliefs about God, some participants quickly moved away from their conceptualizations of God the Father and focused more heavily on the person of Jesus, whom they saw as merciful and loving in contrast with God the Father's wrath and intensity. Many engaged in increased critical thought regarding the person of Jesus in his historical context and began to recognize and appreciate Jesus as a socialist figure who emphasized community care. Ruth stated,

> My perspective of God – definitely, the version that I think is taught in the Bible and in the Book of Mormon and the doctrine and covenants (which are like the LDS Scriptures) – he's just an abusive asshole. And so that kind of

> went relatively quickly for me. Concepts of Jesus were a little different, because he's not associated so much with the fire and brimstone kind of language, you know. But my perspective now is very different.

Similarly, many participants found Jesus to be more palatable and approachable than God. In deconstructing, many participants reported actually feeling more aligned with the character of Jesus in the ways they treated others, voted, and behaved. Will stated,

> As a kid, I was very afraid of God, because – I mean, the trinity doesn't make sense, I think to anybody. … Big God – Dad God – was very scary. Like, "Oh, I don't want to pray to God, because God's the one who, like, you know, is going to, like, punish me. God's the one who, you know, is, like, relentless, but is also loving at the same time, but also kills people. Like, I don't get that." And so, it was always Jesus. It was always, "Okay, I'll pray to Jesus with the Holy Spirit, because those two feel safe." Then, as I deconstructed, right, I got to this place where, "Oh, Jesus was leading people to a more community-based, peaceful way of living."

Through deconstruction, participants also processed incongruences and logical fallacies regarding the person of God. For example, Aria stated, "You cannot claim to have an omnipotent being and also have free will." Many participants sensed that their lived experience did not align with evangelical teachings about God. Some who worked in human services fields realized that they no longer felt comforted by the idea that God had a plan, given their work with individuals and families who had experienced systemic oppression, trauma, and generations of addiction, mental illness, poverty, and racism. Aria stated, "The more that I experience of the world, and the more I look at the world, the less I believe in a benevolent higher power." Logic, education,

and life experience contributed to cognitive processes of dissecting God's nature and character. While these analyses and shifts often felt overwhelming, participants felt they were part of a natural, healthy, and somewhat inevitable developmental progression.

Participants' current beliefs about God varied. Most no longer believed in a specific God, especially the God of the Bible or the evangelical God. Celeste stated, "If the God of the Bible is real, he's a sadistic, punitive, evil being. … If the Bible is factual, he's a malignant narcissist." Similarly, Marie stated, "If there is a God that's out there – which feels really terrible to say that – but, if there is a God that's out there, he didn't do shit for me." Two participants reported still believing in God; some currently believed that Jesus was a human being who truly existed but was not the son of God; and some participants remained unsure of their beliefs about a deity or believed in a broader idea of God, the Universe, or "God in us." Participants expressed a variety of emotional responses to their shifting perceptions of God, including anger, grief, and indifference. Overall, participants either drastically reconstructed their conceptualization of God or discontinued believing in God; however, all participants divested from views of God based on evangelical teachings and interpretations of the Bible.

Shifts in Belief about the Bible

In comparison with beliefs about God, beliefs about the Bible tended to shift early and drastically. During latent or pre-deconstruction, participants believed that the Bible was written by God speaking through human beings and that it was authoritative and perfect. Participants recognized through deconstruction that the Bible did not "add up" (Aria) or make logical sense; they also realized that the Bible's teachings were misaligned with their lived experiences and values. Participants reported that learning about the canonization process, the Bible's historical context, relevant archaeological findings, and the evolution of the doctrine and rituals of

Christianity highlighted the flawed and fallible nature of the Bible. Many participants recalled learning that the books forming the Bible were edited, removed, or inserted over centuries and were influenced by the agendas and narratives of those in power. Kyle stated,

> I hadn't learned Bible history at all. I had learned apologetics my whole life, and those are very different things. So, reading about actual history done by actual historians, and being like, "Oh, like, none of this is reliable. Like, I wouldn't use this source of information for literally anything else in my life." … Again, the myth-making of it, and how malleable the Bible is – how it's a fascinating piece of literature, but, like, yeah, it's also used so much as propaganda.

Specific changes in beliefs about the Bible included no longer believing that it was literally, absolutely, and authoritatively true. Participants also discontinued believing in the Bible's divine inspiration and supernatural preservation through translation. Aria recalled,

> Texts that I'd held very dear over the years were no longer empowering, but were disempowering, and were distancing me from who I really am, I feel like – and doing that very intentionally, so that the church had power over me and my finances and my decisions.

Some participants described a stage of not believing in the literal events of the Bible, but believing in the overall narratives of the Bible they found meaningful: those of peace, community, and love. Most participants noted that the Bible no longer held any authority over them. Danielle stated, "I basically stopped reading the Bible. … Now I think it's a bunch of horse poop." Devaluing the texts of the Bible contributed to shifts in religious practice, empowered participants to self-determine their morality, eased cognitive dissonance around

violent or oppressive biblical narratives, and decreased perceptions of evangelicalism's authority. Participants tended not to read, value, or feel influenced by the Bible in comparison with their latent or pre-deconstruction practices.

Shifts in Belief about Humanity

As participants shifted their beliefs about God and the Bible, as described in the previous sections, they also shifted their beliefs about people and human nature. Beliefs about humanity during latent or pre-deconstruction emphasized the depraved, sinful, and worthless nature of humanity without God's redemption. Participants' beliefs were characterized by an "us versus them" mentality regarding non-Christians, which positioned non-Christians and nonevangelicals as separate, undesirable, and wicked. Participants found that these beliefs about humanity contributed to judgment, fear, and avoidance of nonevangelicals and to rigid adherence to evangelical behavioral expectations. Regarding human suffering, participants previously believed that distress was an indication that God had something to teach them or that they were engaged in sin; they also believed that experiencing or expressing anger, grief, or sadness was sinful and an indication of misalignment with God's will and commands. Participants recalled their evangelical beliefs promoting disregard or contempt toward the human body; this included fatphobia, an emphasis on not trusting one's body, ableism, and the idea that the body or "flesh" was evil. Some reported that evangelical teachings encouraged them to either ignore somatic experiences or view them as God's messaging. Participants associated their beliefs about humanity during latent or pre-deconstruction with resentment toward and disconnection from their bodies, shame and repression around emotions, and fear-based perfectionism.

Participants described significant shifts in their beliefs about humanity through acute deconstruction. They rejected the "us versus them" mentality that they had been taught and

shifted to the belief that people of different religious beliefs were not wicked or to be othered; rather, they came to believe that diversity of beliefs was valid and valuable. Participants reframed their beliefs around suffering to view distress, including sadness, anger, and grief, as a natural and meaningful part of life. Participants no longer believed in inherent human depravity, sinfulness, or worthlessness apart from God; instead, they endorsed belief in the inherent value of human life. Aria stated, "We all have value and worth outside of – and especially in a capitalist society – outside of our productivity, and outside of our value to someone else, or some other belief system, or to God, or whatever." Participants moved toward views of the body as inherently good and worthy of respect. Some participants described moving from fatphobia to fat positivity, body neutrality, or anti-diet culture beliefs. Aria stated,

> I think that's, again, an example of how Christianity doesn't respect boundaries or consent. And that, in and of itself, can't exist with unconditional love and grace. … All bodies are good and valid, and every person has inherent dignity and worth. … Body positivity and fat positivity had to do with the journey of recognizing: If my body is not a temple, if my body is just a body, and it's not about how it serves someone else, but just about how I exist in the world – then there's a validity there that doesn't match what the Bible says.

Participants' changed beliefs about humanity felt freeing, dignifying, and easy, improving their perceived relational satisfaction and self-concepts.

Shifts in Belief about the Afterlife

Many participants discussed changes in what they believed about the afterlife. All participants who addressed the afterlife reported no longer believing in people going to hell, nor in people being divided in the afterlife according to their level of goodness or belief in Jesus.

Many no longer believed in heaven or hell at all, but rather in the preservation of energy and the natural cycle of death and life. Others believed in a peaceful afterlife that did not depend on being a Christian or having a salvation experience. Discontinued belief in hell was a theme in many participants' deconstruction processes and contributed to decreased anxiety, pressure, and relational distress.

Shifts in Belief about Religion and Spirituality

Compared with the shifts in belief discussed so far, some changes were less connected to specific areas of doctrine and were more related to overall conceptions of religion and spirituality; deconstruction involved a renegotiation and reframing of participants' prior and ongoing religious and spiritual experiences. Participants described their former beliefs about spirituality as rigid, having believed that their form of evangelical Christianity was the only valid religion and worldview. Some participants believed that, while in latent or pre-deconstruction, they had convinced themselves that they were feeling God's presence out of necessity or desperation. Through acute and ongoing deconstruction, some participants reconceptualized their former prayer practices as their connection to their faith community, the earth's energy, or themselves. Ruth stated,

> I feel like the spiritual experiences that I had before, that I would have attributed to, like, a connection with Jesus, are really just, like, that is the love that I had accessible for myself always, but I just was never allowed to or encouraged to access.

Similarly, Celeste recalled,

> I remember being on my bed and just crying because I felt really sad and alone, and I had heard a sermon earlier that day about "God will never leave

> you or forsake you" message. And so, I was really holding to that message, and I felt very comforted by that message, and the way I attribute that now is that I was comforting myself.

During acute deconstruction, some participants were initially against all organized religion. These participants noted that they later opened up to the potential for healthy religious and spiritual expression, no longer believing that it was their responsibility or right to tell others what to believe or what is real. Participants' reconstructed beliefs about spirituality emphasized connectedness to the great collective of humanity, community care, nature, embodiment, and transformative energy as foundational to their beliefs. Ruth stated, "I think where I'm at right now is more a sense of just the interconnectivity of all living things, you know? And the basic respect and care that we all need." Some participants commented on the sociological origins of world religions and the patterns in myth making, belief systems, and the evolution of the Christian church as influential in their shifting perspectives.

Participants reported that they had come to find beauty in the unknown and were grateful for the expansive, broadened perspectives they had cultivated. They found that they moved away from extremes and became comfortable with nuance; Sue referred to this process as an "unfurling." Some participants found it meaningful to explore their ancestors' religions as part of spiritual exploration and decolonization. The shifts in belief described in this section affected participants' retrospective views of their time in evangelicalism, as well as their perceptions of religion and spirituality moving forward; participants came to see organized religion largely as a tool of domination and control, while they generally viewed spirituality as personal, flexible, and nonrestrictive.

Shifts in Spiritual Practice and Identity

The shifts in beliefs about religion and spirituality described above related to major shifts in participants' spiritual practices and identities. Participants described their practices during latent or pre-deconstruction as including daily Bible reading, prayer, attendance at one or more weekly church services, participation in ministry and service, evangelism, and sometimes fasting. Most participants discontinued these practices early in acute deconstruction; a few participants initially decreased prayer and later reintegrated versions of it into their spiritual practice. Participants came to see the rigidity of their former practices as based in control or false dichotomies and stated that they had moved away from strict practices to ones they described as expansive. These current expressions of spirituality tended to be more flexible and less ritualistic than those they engaged in previously.

Participants' reconstructed spiritual practices focused largely on love, kindness, human rights, community care, advocacy, mutual aid, the here-and-now, self-care, and nature. Jolie stated, "I am spiritual in the sense that I connect with nature; I connect with people around me when I can." Most participants described connection to the earth as primary to their belief system; some highlighted the meaningfulness of remaining in tune with the seasons and natural cycles. Participants overwhelmingly reported living more love-based lives as an outcome of their deconstruction. Taking meaningful action to care for the self and for others largely replaced former religious rituals; expressions of this intra- and interpersonal lovingkindness were flexible and holistic.

Participants retained any elements of evangelical Christianity they found life giving and paired these with other spiritual beliefs and expressions. Some continued to pray to the universe, themselves, or nothing, finding this helpful in times of distress. Some participants explored and

integrated practices based in Paganism, Buddhism, science, meditation, Witchcraft, Tarot, crystals, astrology, chanting, yoga, nature, and the Wheel of the Year. Reconstructed practices were not necessarily religious or spiritual in nature; many participants also categorized therapy, prioritizing friendships, and self-care as current practices. Other practices included labyrinth walking, candle lighting, music, float tanks, and poetry. These restructured practices provided senses of belonging, meaning, ritual, and growth.

Participants held their new spiritual identities more loosely than they had their former evangelical identities. Participants' current spiritual identities included Atheist, Atheopagan, Agnostic, and Christian Universalist. Some participants no longer used the words "spiritual" or "religious," but identified as reverent or as having sacred spaces or rituals. Through deconstruction, participants underwent intense changes in their spiritual practices and identities in alignment with their shifting beliefs and in congruence with their needs and values.

Shifts in Belief about Purity Culture

Beliefs about purity culture comprised another specific area of change through deconstruction. During latent or pre-deconstruction, participants believed that engaging in any sexual activity outside of heterosexual marriage was sinful and dangerous. Their beliefs emphasized the importance of preserving one's virginity for one's spouse and contributed to significant shame, repression, and anxiety around their bodies and sexuality. Participants had also believed that women and girls were responsible for dressing and behaving in a way that protected men and boys from sinning by lusting after them, which participants linked to harmful relational patterns and mental health outcomes.

Participants came to view purity culture as an intentional means of control and divested from its core assumptions. Many participants recalled discovering that safe sexual activity and

intimacy felt good, healthy, and fulfilling, and did not feel like an evil, damaging act as they had been taught. They deconstructed the idea of virginity and rejected the belief that sexual activity before marriage was wrong. Sue stated,

> They talk it up so much that you feel like there's gonna be, like, a gong or something go off when it happens. And, like, nothing happened. It just happened to be the first time I did that thing, you know? There's all sorts of things that I've done for the first time, and, like, there's not anything significant about this. And yet there's so much built up about that.

Participants endorsed current beliefs that affirmed safe and consensual sexual activity regardless of marital status. In acute deconstruction, participants rejected the idea that women and girls were responsible for men's thoughts and behavior. They also reconceptualized purity culture and associated beliefs as means of enforcing gender roles and as objectifying and controlling toward women and girls. These changes shaped participants' relationships with their bodies and with their sexual and romantic partners. Major shifts in belief about purity culture involved the destigmatization of sex, the rejection of the importance of virginity as a construct, and divestment from the idea that women and girls moderate men and boys' sexual behavior. Additional changes in beliefs about gender roles will be discussed in the next section.

Shifts in Belief about Gender Roles

In addition to rejecting purity culture, participants underwent shifts in their overall beliefs about gender roles and expectations. Participants described their latent or pre-deconstruction beliefs about gender as focused on strict gender roles; they had adhered to predetermined behavioral guidelines based in complementarianism, which positioned men as authoritative and women as nurturing and submissive. Many participants noted that beliefs based on the gender-

based hierarchy within evangelical teachings were a longstanding source of discomfort and cognitive dissonance prior to acute deconstruction.

Through acute deconstruction, participants no longer adhered to rigid gender roles, nor to complementarianism. Instead, they believed that women and men held equal value and authority and that roles in society should be self-determined and not restricted by gender. Danielle recalled the "mind blowing" realization at one point in her deconstruction that "God loves women just as much as he loves men," saying that she needed to learn "Feminism 101." Major shifts in beliefs about gender included emphases on equality between genders, acknowledgement of gender-based injustice and oppression, and rejection of gender-based rules, roles, and expectations. They also included a shift toward affirmation of gender as a separate construct from biological sex and of gender non-conforming identities, described in more detail below.

Shifts in Belief about Sexual and Gender Minoritized Identities

Shifts in beliefs about sexual and gender minoritized identities emerged as a consistent theme; despite the semi-structured nature of the interviews, 14 out of 16 participants specifically brought up that their beliefs about LGBTQIA+ groups had changed through deconstruction. For many, believing that LGBTQIA+ identities and relationships were sinful had been distressing to them during latent or pre-deconstruction. Celeste recalled the powerful realization that queerness was innate, contrary to what her pastors had taught. Participants grappled with and unlearned internalized homophobia. At an early point in acute deconstruction and before recognizing that she was gay, Danielle recalled thinking,

> So, if it's not a choice and if God doesn't make mistakes, it seems like God makes gay people. If I'm wrong, I will stand before judgment, you know, when

> I die – and God can say, you know, "You fucked up." But at least I will treat people with love.

Participants overwhelmingly moved from non-affirming to affirming views of sexual and gender minoritized identities, often early in acute deconstruction, finding this shift relieving and empowering. Overall, beliefs about LGBTQIA+ identities and relationships changed drastically as a component of religious deconstruction.

Shifts in Belief about Relationships

Beliefs about the nature and purposes of relationships in general also shifted through deconstruction. During latent or pre-deconstruction, participants believed that their role in relationships was primarily to be of service. They recalled believing that, if they became aware of any way in which they could serve or evangelize to someone – and did not follow through with it – that they were sinning. Some participants had also believed that they ought to remain in relationships that were harmful, such as being bullied, degraded, or sexually harassed, if it was perceived to be in service to God or others; this could include following biblical mandates to suffer alongside Jesus, turn the other cheek, or remain married to an abusive spouse. Participants had also centered the ideas of marriage and having children, influenced by the evangelical "Ring by Spring" emphasis on finding one's spouse early in adulthood.

During acute and ongoing deconstruction, participants renegotiated their beliefs around relationships, including coming to the belief that they are not morally obligated to remain in unhealthy situations. Participants no longer believed they needed to always prioritize others over themselves; rather, they believed in equitable relationships, consent, boundaries, and self-advocacy. Some participants noted that they became affirming of polyamorous and ethically non-monogamous relationships. Participants also decentered heterosexual marriage and child

rearing. Overall shifts in approaches to relationships where characterized by movement from limiting and rigid beliefs to intuitive and empowering beliefs. The next section elaborates on participants' shifting approaches to relationships as they specifically relate to parenting.

Shifts in Approach to Parenting

Participants with and without children reframed their approaches toward parenting through deconstruction. They stated that they no longer supported or engaged in corporal punishment. Those who had been raised under evangelical author and psychologist James Dobson's guidelines expressed rejection of and resentment toward his teachings. Participants' current attitudes toward parenting emphasized children's autonomy and empowerment. Many emphasized supporting their children in exploring their own spiritual beliefs and practices; however, Aria clarified that she would discourage her children from attending church until they had developed critical thinking skills as a protective factor against disempowering teachings. When Kyle had his first child, he thought, "I can't teach him Noah's ark; like, it's developmentally inappropriate. Like, it's genocide. Eternal punishment for a time-constrained infraction is terrible; like, that's tyranny." Participants highlighted the importance of protecting children and supporting them in developing their own identities, contrasting this with the way they themselves were raised. Perspectives on children and parenting shifted throughout deconstruction and centered around themes of autonomy, safety, and empowerment.

Shifts in Political Beliefs and Identities

The final major shift that emerged through deconstruction related to politics. Participants noted significant shifts in their political beliefs and identities, including becoming supportive of social programs, LGBTQIA+ rights, environmental sustainability, disability rights, racial justice, abortion, and reproductive healthcare. Participants disaffiliated from the Republican party and

shifted from pro-life to pro-choice stances with regard to abortion and reproductive healthcare. Many became advocates for human rights causes and were active in promoting wealth redistribution, reparations, universal healthcare, and affordable housing. Contrasting their former attitudes, participants described coming to see diversity and equity as strengthening their community.

This section has delineated major themes in shifts that took place during deconstruction; this included changes in beliefs and practices related to evangelical doctrine, human nature, relationships, religion, and politics. These shifts reflected participants' internal processes of dissecting the evangelical culture and worldview which had surrounded and molded them, as well as participants' development, integration, and expression of increased agency and congruence. Changes in belief and practice, as one facet of deconstruction, both influenced and were influenced by participants' relational and psychological worlds. The next section will focus on psychosocial dynamics related to the deconstruction process.

Psychosocial Dynamics Related to Deconstruction

In addition to the cognitive and behavioral shifts discussed above, deconstruction involved deep interpersonal and psychological processes as participants navigated the implications of their previously held and newly developing worldviews. Key themes emerged in psychosocial dynamics related to participants' religious deconstruction processes; these included themes in participants' interpersonal relationships, mental health, and experiences with mental health counseling.

Relational Dynamics Related to Deconstruction

Participants extensively discussed their interpersonal relationships and the social dynamics that unfolded during deconstruction. Because of the inherent social roles, rules, and

patterns in evangelicalism, an important component of deconstruction involved recognizing relational harm and reorganizing approaches to relationships. Consistent patterns in participants' relationships included experiences of rejection and isolation, complex dynamics with family and friends, and the cultivation of new community and healthy relationships.

Rejection and Isolation

Experiences of social rejection were a consistent and profound theme of participants' deconstruction processes; participants highlighted interpersonal rejection and the subsequent loss of their community as the primary challenges of deconstruction. Participants' families, church leaders, church members, and others in their communities responded to their deconstruction by ostracizing them, accusing them of sinning by questioning their faith, removing them from leadership or ministry positions, no longer speaking to them, or informing others of their personal struggles without their consent. Some participants felt as though they did not belong in the church after beginning to deconstruct and being pushed out and excluded. Quinn recalled, "I wasn't Christian enough in the church, but I wasn't areligious enough for everybody else." Participants described losing their church communities as lonely, abrupt, and painful. Some remained active in their churches in an attempt to maintain their communities, promote positive change within evangelicalism, and challenge harmful teachings and practices; these attempts resulted in experiences of ostracization and rejection.

Participants' deconstruction experiences tended to be lonely and isolating – not only because of this rejection from their communities and families, but also due to a lack of peers who understood the deconstruction experience. Marie stated, "It's just so validating for me to hear about it. It's nice to know that you're not the only one that's gone through it." Participants who were married or partnered with people who were not raised in evangelicalism had difficulty with

their partners not understanding the all-encompassing nature of indoctrination and deconstruction. Amy stated,

> Feeling like I was alone at first was a very big challenge for me. I felt like nobody else had had this experience. Little did I know that at the same time, basically for the same reason, a lot of us started deconstructing.

While few participants were able to minimize their felt loneliness by developing new relationships and community early in acute deconstruction, relational rejection and the resulting isolation were pervasive and highly distressing for all participants.

Betrayal

The rejection described above was connected to a deep sense of betrayal for many participants. Many participants felt betrayed by their former communities, saying that the church had promised a trustworthy and protective system that they found to be harmful in reality. Some also felt betrayed when they experienced difficult life circumstances and their churches, families, and friends did not support them – and instead often blamed them. Participants also perceived unethical, hypocritical, and dishonest behavior by church leaders as betrayals of their trust. Many participants found, in retrospect, that care from their evangelical families, friends, and churches had been disingenuous; some even realized that their families had followed scripts and formulas from Christian books or leadership rather than being authentic in their parenting. These and other instances of betrayal had profound impacts on participants' relational health and capacity to trust, leading participants to increase their intentionality, discernment, and boundaries in forming close relationships. Many experiences of betrayal were connected with participants' families of origin, discussed in more detail in the next section.

Family of Origin Dynamics

Deconstruction held complex and painful dynamics within participants' families of origin. Conflict with parents in particular emerged as a substantial challenge of deconstruction; Sue stated, "It felt like being ripped away from my family." Some participants' parents discontinued speaking to them because of their deconstruction. Some noted that their conflict with their family surrounded their deconstruction of evangelical beliefs, as well as of Christian fascism, politics, and other systems of oppression; some also specifically surrounded participants' coming out as LGBTQ+.

Some participants discontinued contact with all evangelical family members, while others cut off contact with most religious family members but maintained communication with their immediate family. Other participants stopped speaking to family members for periods of time. Lillie stated,

> And then, you know, losing my whole family. My parents – we eventually sort of reconciled, but I've never and even now can't be my real self when I go visit them. I can't be my real self around my family because it's just not worth it. At this point in my life, I'm like, "I'm not gonna fight with you people. I am who I am; you're who you are; let's just love each other and I'm not gonna be here very long." … It would just be more conflict and more rejection. And I'm just like, "I can't." I can pretend for a couple of days.

Aria stated,

> It drives me crazy that I'm sure my mom is praying for me. And instead of just learning who I am and trying to communicate with me, she's praying for me to change. And I think that's just wrong and yucky.

Amy emphasized the difficulty of "admitting that your parents don't love you for who you are." Sue stated, "[My sister's] like, 'Well, I still love you.' And I'm like, 'There's a dissonance there, though, because you have to love all of me – you can't just love the things that you like.'"

Participants who remained in contact with their families of origin found it difficult to navigate ongoing relationships with evangelical family, finding their parents unable to engage in productive conversations. Aria stated,

> My relationship with my mom is fraught because of, partially, the religious stuff. I hold a lot of judgment toward her for staying where she is and believing what she does still – and the way she holds those beliefs and can't seem to hold anything else.

Sue recalled their mom saying, "You can't come back home. … You cannot be around the kids. You're going to hell. You're filled with the devil." Sarah's family of origin told her that she and her spouse and children experienced a traumatic event because they had dyed eggs rather than focusing on Jesus's resurrection on Easter. Amy stated,

> This is the work I'm doing right now: recognizing that my parents don't know who I am. … Through the deconstruction process and the therapy I realized they would give me nothing. Like, I'd call them every day and they never have what I need. … So I created a distance.

Similarly, Marie stated,

> When it comes to, like, my dad and my relationship with him, you know, I've just learned that it's not worth it because he's not gonna say anything that's helpful. I've recently – within, like, the last couple of months – kind of cut that off to where I now only talk to them if it's, like, absolutely necessary, which is

> really difficult because I used to talk to them, like, all the time even though it was painful.

Many participants made efforts not to talk about religion and politics with their families of origin. Some participants put additional distance between themselves and their families around the 2016 and 2024 elections due to their families' support of Donald Trump.

Some participants found it difficult to establish boundaries with their parents, especially with the engrained evangelical teaching to obey elders; they described still wanting to be a good child and not disappoint their parents. Several participants limited their evangelical parents' access to their own children due to concerns about boundary violations and indoctrination. Some participants still frequently had family contact them to ask about their religious beliefs, state that they were praying for them, try to convince them to attend church or bring their children to church, or emphasize that they can always come back to God. Amy spoke about a desire to write a book about her deconstruction process but stated that she would not be able to publish it until her parents died. Some participants stated that they were hesitant to talk to many people about their deconstruction to avoid the information getting back to their parents.

Participants found it complicated to balance their deconstruction processes with an understanding of their families' worldviews. Quinn stated,

> Empathizing with the idea that [my parents] genuinely think that my children are going to hell, and how scary and terrible for them – but also, like, keep that to yourself; that's weird. … I grew up with corporal punishment and intense – now I can say it – intense indoctrination. Even if my parents were doing the best they could with the information that they had.

Quinn also recalled reading an article that identified how the brains of people who identified as evangelical were hyperresponsive to stimuli and perceived even pleasant and neutral stimuli as threatening; she found that this understanding helped her to have empathy for family members still identifying as evangelical.

Another facet of relational difficulty was due to some participants' families rejecting their partnerships or marriages with those who were not evangelical. Lillie recalled,

> I met a man who eventually became my husband, and he was Catholic. And that was very bad. I married him, and it was very dramatic – I was shunned by big swaths of my family, including my parents and my brother. My mother threatened to kill herself. I mean, it was very, very awful. Very awful, very dramatic.

Eli stated,

> Our relationship is a queer relationship and my parents very much, like, blamed my partner at times for my deconstruction. But I was like, "Actually, it's the reverse." Because my partner was almost the first person I met who was, like, very genuinely interested and supportive of my Christian beliefs who wasn't a Christian themselves – who was very curious and wanted to hear about it and never discouraged anything or questioned anything in a negative way. But it was like having that safe space made me realize, like, "Oh, when I'm not trying to defend myself, I don't actually know why I care about this so much."

Many of the family dynamics discussed in this section mirrored participants' experiences with friendships throughout deconstruction, as described below.

Friendship Dynamics

Participants highlighted complicated and distressing friendship dynamics throughout deconstruction. During her latent or pre-deconstruction, Sophia felt conflicted about her best friend coming out as gay; she stated that telling her friend that she would not be able to attend their wedding irreparably ruptured their friendship. When entering acute deconstruction, most participants had very few friends who were not evangelicals; many attributed this to the exclusivity within evangelicalism and the rejection of non-evangelical identities, beliefs, and practices. Some participants described their former evangelical communities as closed and difficult to enter if someone was not born into the group.

During acute deconstruction, participants stated that many close relationships ended abruptly. Lillie stated, “It was so, so hard to live through that … People that I really did think were going to be my friends for life don’t talk to me anymore.” Sarah stated, “I have lost almost every friend I’ve had.” Some participants described sadness at the loss of lifelong and childhood friends, lamenting that there was simply no way to replace these relationships. Eli described the value of friendships with others from their childhood who had also deconstructed: “Just being able to have that added context and validation from people who know your family history and everything – that’s been really helpful and has definitely strengthened those bonds.” In retrospect, some participants realized that most of their evangelical relationships had been superficial and that the depths of the bonds within their community were not at the level they had believed them to be.

Participants found it challenging to articulate their deconstruction to those who were still holding to evangelical beliefs. Will stated,

> I lost a lot of friendships. Like, I have a few that I have been able to maintain where we have differences of opinion on things like religion, on, like, fundamental things. A lot of relationships no longer exist or are really, really damaged because there just isn't a middle ground to be found, right? Because there's so much fear in being able to say "We disagree" from their side that it just doesn't work – or so much pain from my side, because, like, I was treated really horribly.

Participants who maintained contact with childhood friends who were still part of the evangelical faith tended to avoid talking about religion and to focus on shared memories. Participants noted that it was easier to stay in relationship with progressive Christians than with evangelical Christians. It was difficult and uncomfortable to navigate interactions with people who were evangelical or in spaces that were predominantly or overtly evangelical; some participants stated it was emotionally difficult to see other people still in evangelicalism. Many had gone on to help others who deconstructed.

Some participants who were not publicly out as deconstructed at the time of their interviews expressed discomfort with knowing that some of their friends would not like them or speak to them if they knew who they truly were. Some participants continued to pretend to be evangelical Christians to maintain their children's friendships or avoid a variety of consequences. Some pulled back from relationships preemptively, anticipating the pain of rejection. Participants tended to be closer with longstanding friends who had also deconstructed. Ruptures in friendships contributed to both the difficulty and urgency participants felt in developing their new communities.

New Community Development

Participants highlighted community development as both a primary benefit and challenge of deconstruction. Participants benefited greatly from cultivating new, genuine community for themselves; however, most participants found this difficult, especially those still immersed in largely evangelical areas. Ruth highlighted how difficult it had been for her, her partner, and their children to receive rejection and judgement from their community due to the highly religious nature of the local culture; she noted a widespread assumption that everyone in her area was a conservative, evangelical Christian. Most participants described immense difficulty finding new people who felt safe. Aria stated,

> I think one of the hard parts is just losing your whole sense of community and trying to rebuild that over time without being part of a church – it's really difficult. It's one of the few places that you can make friends (ish) as an adult, I feel like, and I think that is an attraction for a lot of people. But it's not the friends I want to have. … I know I could walk into a church and parade around spirituality and make friends that way. But they're not the kind of friends I would want to have. It's not the quality of friendship that I would prefer. … I want community that means something to me. … My therapist keeps telling me that there are emotionally intelligent people out there that are available to have friendships with. And I'm like, "Where do you think I would find those people?"

Ruth stated, "It's hard to feel like there are truly safe communities that could, like, adequately replace that [community] so that you can still have support and a sense of belonging." Some participants found it difficult to develop trust with new friends and partners. Lillie stated,

> The hardest part of deconstruction is the constant loss of community. It definitely has made me less – I used to be pretty outgoing and pretty easy to enter into relationships, you know, pretty open. And now I'm very closed off, and it's really hard to trust people. It's really hard to be myself. It's really hard to be transparent and authentic. So it's really, really lonely.

Participants found it helpful to be able to talk about their deconstruction experiences with others. Some had talked openly and publicly about their deconstruction, while others continued to hide their beliefs from select people. Those who had found others with deconstruction experiences emphasized the value of these relationships; Danielle described a group of former evangelicals as a "soft place to land." Those who navigated deconstruction with peers described this as hugely supportive, while others expressed gratitude for the current study because they did not have other people in their lives with whom they felt they could discuss their deconstruction processes. Participants expressed a strong need and desire for a religious deconstruction community.

Overall, participants reported that their social circles were smaller, but more life-giving than they were prior to acute and ongoing deconstruction. Participants created their own support systems and found or chosen families. Some found this community predominantly online with other individuals deconstructing; Amy stated, "You feel like they're your community, even though you don't know them." Participants also found it rewarding to be able to be friends with non-Christians, noting that those they met outside the church largely turned out to be kinder and more authentic than those in their churches. Although challenging, the process of developing new community was connected to increased overall relational health and satisfaction.

Increased Relational Health

Participants developed authenticity, boundaries, and healthy relationship styles through deconstruction. However, they initially found it challenging to cultivate healthy, trusting relationships due to unhealthy relational patterns developed in their former evangelical communities. They found that they needed to unlearn codependence and habits of looking for hidden meanings behind what others would say. Some participants found their social skills underdeveloped upon entering acute deconstruction. These realizations were frustrating and grief-laden, although participants considered them a necessary, productive, and worthwhile step in their deconstruction and reconstruction of relationship patterns.

Participants initially found it difficult to advocate for themselves and learn assertiveness; they described struggling to stand up for themselves and informing others when they had hurt feelings. Despite these challenges, participants developed and integrated new skills for expressing their inner states and asserting their needs. Participants cultivated new boundaries around such interactions as church invitations, requests for service, listening to others talk about God, sharing private information, being close with harmful people, and tolerating rude or dehumanizing speech.

Participants also increased their sense of empowerment in relationships. Many participants found that they had been able to move past a helper role and engage in more balanced relationships. Will spoke about finally having "permission to have good connective relationship with people and not be afraid about their ultimate salvation – I just get to enjoy them as a person." Participants unlearned patterns of holding immense judgment for other people and focused on mutual respect and appreciation. Participants also highlighted selectivity in relationships and diversity of community as benefits of the deconstruction process. Kyle noted,

“The people who I was preached to be wary of my whole life are the people who I vibe with the best.”

This section has described relational dynamics that participants identified as related to their deconstruction processes. Themes of these narratives included painful instances of rejection, isolation, and betrayal in participants’ relationships with evangelical churches, families, and friends. Participants also highlighted the difficult and highly rewarding task of developing new relational patterns and community. These relational dynamics were intertwined with the mental health dynamics discussed in the following section.

Mental Health Dynamics Related to Deconstruction

All stages of deconstruction involved powerful mental health dynamics due to the complex interaction between evangelical culture, shifts in belief and practice, and relationships. First, participants described many mental health challenges associated with their former evangelical beliefs, including depression, anxiety, dissociation, post-traumatic stress, relational trauma, obsessions, compulsions, and scrupulosity. All participants reported improved mental health and decreased mental health challenges and symptoms through their deconstruction processes. Kyle stated, “My mental health definitely got better through deconstruction. I think just being more authentic and more congruent was obviously a good thing.” Danielle found it transformative to learn and integrate three things: “I am good, I am loved, and I am free.” Some protective factors supporting participants’ mental health during acute deconstruction included moving away from home, developing critical thinking skills, and being exposed to others who deconstructed. Participants highlighted increases in compassion, self-acceptance, fulfillment, authenticity, healthy inquisition, autonomy, comfort with uncertainty, and empowerment as beneficial mental health outcomes of their deconstruction processes.

Anxiety

During latent or pre-deconstruction, most participants experienced anxiety associated with fears of judgment and wrongdoing, as well as the pressure to meet high community expectations. Participants emphasized that anxiety was a logical and natural response to the evangelical doctrine they were taught. Many had felt significant fear of God and God's anger, especially as children. Participants also recalled intense fears of hell and of eternal separation from loved ones whom they believed would go to hell. Some had severe anxiety regarding eternity, describing their concept of Heaven as awful, boring, and an unwanted continuation of their suffering. Participants highlighted the destabilizing effects of anxiety, including nightmares, physiological distress, and acute anxiety or panic attacks. For many, anxiety increased sharply with the onset of acute deconstruction, as participants abruptly lost access to their evangelically based resources for finding hope, making meaning, coping with loss and mortality, receiving social support, and understanding their purpose and identity.

Participants' anxiety decreased as they moved through acute and ongoing deconstruction. While they experienced some anxiety recurrence, they noted that it was less powerful and threatening than it had been during latent or pre-deconstruction. Some participants reported still encountering infrequent fears, anxiety, and panic that they were wrong about their deconstructed beliefs and would go to hell. These decreased fears included concerns about the rapture and the period of tribulations and, for some, were related to scrupulosity or obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD).

OCD

Many participants described dealing with symptoms of OCD, including rumination, compulsive prayer and repentance, and scrupulosity. For Amy, reminding herself of her

reconstructed beliefs and asking herself, “In the here-and-now, what evidence do I have that this thought is true?” helped her cope with OCD symptoms and not get stuck in a “thought loop.” Many participants had obsessions and compulsions around following the Bible in order to avoid hell. Jolie recalled,

> I had a lot of obsessive fears about Christianity – about the rapture in particular. The Bible says no one knows the hour or the day of Christ’s return, so I would go around in my head mentally, being like, ‘He’s gonna come back. He’s gonna come back.’ – trying to save the world from the rapture, because my dad wasn’t a Christian and because I had friends that weren’t Christians and I didn’t want to be eternally separated from them. So, I tried to predict the rapture constantly.

Some participants dealt with moral perfectionism and a strong sense of pressure never to make a mistake or disappoint someone. Some felt consistently worried about others being upset with them and engaged in compulsive checking to make sure that their relationships were in good standing. Amy stated,

> I have something called relationship OCD. It’s not talked about a lot, and also the definition of it in research is very narrow. I had this extreme fear of abandonment. … From a very young age, I had this extreme need and this extreme fear that people would leave me. And so, I would be like, “Why didn’t you call me? Why didn’t you text me?” That level of anxiety, which is really, really OCD – it’s a compulsion that I had. I’d have the thought, then I’d have the behavior.

Some participants associated difficulty trusting and accepting unconditional love from their partners or spouses with obsessions and compulsions. Sophia found that deconstruction fostered tension in her marriage, while Sue recalled "pushing the envelope" as a way of testing their relationship with their spouse. Similar to the other mental health challenges described in this section, obsessive-compulsive symptoms were more severe during latent or pre-deconstruction and early in acute deconstruction, improving over time through acute and ongoing deconstruction.

Depression

Some participants also reported symptoms of depression and existential dread. These were often connected with negative self-concepts and conditions of worth ingrained during their evangelical upbringings. Jolie stated,

> It also added to the depression in that, like, without God, you're not worth anything. Without God, you are the dirt under everyone's shoe. Without God, you're never gonna amount to anything or be anyone or have any success or things like that.

Ruth described depressive symptoms in the context of her former perspectives on sadness, judgment, and shame:

> If someone else does something and then I feel sad about it, they did something wrong, because I shouldn't be feeling that way. If I could check off on my side of the list that I didn't do anything to make it happen, then I was totally entitled to be judgmental to that other person or blame them for things or be passive aggressive or something. And I think that, from a childhood brain development

> perspective, that teaching about emotions is so, so, so harmful, and I think it causes an immense sense of shame of just being human.

Aria connected her experience of depression with having an underdeveloped sense of agency. Participants who experienced depressive symptoms tended to have more severe symptoms during latent or pre-deconstruction and at the beginning of acute deconstruction, as they lost their established senses of hope, meaning, and connection; they found relief later on in acute deconstruction and throughout ongoing deconstruction.

Trauma

Many participants endorsed trauma, complex trauma, relational trauma, or religious trauma, which appeared during latent or pre-deconstruction and had since decreased. Symptoms included increased nervous system arousal, heightened fear response, and intrusive symptoms related to demons, sin, hell, and God's punishment. Kyle stated,

> My religious trauma was, like, very much hell trauma. Like, I was scared of going to hell. And that was, like, a strong enough motivator to keep me in it, even with all these other questions that I had. So, like, I think there's that, like, trauma – or for sure, fear – piece of, like, ignoring what my brain or my body or my emotions or my values were telling me.

Some participants described dissociative tendencies and efforts to turn off and repress emotions, which they connected with spiritual bypassing, a lack of freedom to doubt or question, and insufficient supports for coping with trauma and distress. Celeste described the control, dismissiveness, and gender-based oppression in evangelical culture as significantly traumatic, especially for women and those assigned female at birth. Some participants noted that their evangelical beliefs had been a risk factor for them to experience additional trauma, especially as

related to not questioning abusive male authority. Experiences of trauma were complex and wide-reaching; participants stated that trauma-related symptoms improved over time.

Cognitive Dissonance and Incongruence

In addition to the clinical symptoms described above, participants endorsed a longstanding misalignment of their self-concept, sense of meaning, and social context while in latent or pre-deconstruction. Participants felt forced to live with incongruences due to their restrictive evangelical environments. Some participants reckoned with not feeling God's presence during difficult times when they believed they were supposed to sense God's comfort. Some recalled begging God for spiritual experiences, to speak in tongues, or to feel a connection to the Holy Spirit; they felt disappointed not to have experienced the euphoric feeling they expected.

Participants also experienced cognitive dissonance regarding evangelical support of restrictions on reproductive healthcare, abortion access, same-sex marriage, transgender rights, and immigrant rights. Many had internal conflict and cognitive dissonance regarding the condemnation of same-sex relationships; they also noted that their real-life experiences of meeting LGBTQIA+ people did not align with what they had been taught. Jolie recalled evangelical family members making fun of gender nonconforming people and thinking, "This doesn't feel right; this doesn't feel godly." Some participants noted that they had always had feminist leanings and that the gender roles in their evangelical communities had never sat well with them, contributing to incongruence and inner tension.

Participants reported drastically decreased cognitive dissonance through acute and ongoing deconstruction. Some had lingering dissonance about their time spent in evangelicalism, regretting time spent fighting against social justice and human rights causes. Many also regretted

their previous missionary work and religious leadership rooted in colonist, oppressive mindsets. Participants aimed to balance accountability for their past actions with self-compassion and an understanding of the indoctrination and abuse of control under which they had formerly operated. Many participants felt intense anger toward the evangelical church and the damage it inflicts while maintaining a positive image to the general public; Ruth stated, "I think I just feel the anger associated with, you know, just how much damage it does – and how the PR version of the church is so shiny and wonderful." Will emphasized protective anger as a strong reaction to relational rejection, especially early in acute deconstruction. Sarah stated, "I detest the idea that if you pray hard enough, you can get your miracle." Overall, participants reported a powerful and lasting sense of congruence in ongoing deconstruction.

Grief

Multifaceted experiences and expressions of grief also accompanied participants' deconstruction processes. Participants felt significant grief for their former senses of self, community and community-specific identity, and certainty. Aria stated,

> They say in religion, like in Christianity, "There's a hole in your heart and Jesus fills it." I feel like there's a different hole in my heart from missing out on the things I was raised on: to be fed by communion and community and fellowship and worship and all these things that just don't hold the same value and meaning to me, but I haven't replaced them, either, with something else.

Some participants expressed grief for who they might have been without being raised in the church; some also grieved the time they spent prior to acute deconstruction. Kyle stated, "I have to be like, 'It's okay that it took me as long as it did to come out of it; it's manipulative on

purpose.'" Aria endorsed grief regarding Christian colonization and how much diversity of culture and expression had been lost.

Participants noted that grief around losses, especially the deaths of loved ones, had been interconnected with their deconstruction processes. Aria stated, "The more I experience of this world, and the more I experience people dying, the less I can believe in an eternal heaven or hell." Some participants noted difficulty processing family members' deaths now that they did not believe in the evangelical portrayal of the afterlife. Grief emerged as a common theme in participants' mental health dynamics, including losses of identity, coping mechanisms, and relationships.

Identity and Self-Concept

The most prominent mental health theme that arose was around participants' senses of identity. Participants noted that their senses of self during latent or pre-deconstruction were underdeveloped and based entirely on their Christian identity. Many had negative self-concepts and reported difficulty with self-loathing, absent or negative self-image, and never feeling good enough. For some, their self-image had been previously gleaned from their proximity to church leadership. Participants also found it difficult not to internalize suffering and believe that their suffering or distress is their fault. Some participants experienced shame regarding lingering anxiety around hell, not having deconstructed earlier in life, or no longer attending church.

Participants found identity formation to be both a primary challenge and benefit of the deconstruction process. Entering acute deconstruction, they did not know what they believed about themselves or what constituted their identity, realizing that their identities had revolved around God and Christianity. Some participants struggled with transferring one external locus of control to another, such as leaving their church and seeking high control or directiveness from a

relationship. In ongoing deconstruction, participants experienced significantly decreased shame. Jolie stated,

> Once I started deconstructing, I was able to get a little bit more of a sense of who I am outside those things, like: I'm a musician, and I'm a writer, and I'm a social worker. But even now, I still struggle sometimes with the idea of, "I'm bad. And someone's gonna find out."

When the researcher asked Danielle how her sense of self evolved through the deconstruction process, Danielle simply stated, "I found I had one." Through acute and ongoing deconstruction, participants were able to identify their own likes, dislikes, needs, values, and strengths. Some returned to music, books, and activities that held their interest as children or teenagers but that they were not allowed to engage in due to family or church rules. Participants found a major benefit of deconstruction to be giving themselves credit and developing a healthy and grounded sense of self.

Many participants developed an understanding and integration of their queer identity through deconstruction. Those who realized that they were LGBTQIA+ noted that, previously, they did not have language for expansive gender or sexual identities. Some participants had continued to struggle with internalized homophobia. Many found comfort in queer spaces and found fulfilment in authentic gender expression. Some participants felt excitement, joy, and clarity in realizing that they were queer and, thus, having explanations for lifelong thoughts and feelings.

Many participants also developed a sense of their own neurodiversity through deconstruction, including having attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, autism spectrum disorder, or both. A few participants also reflected on a pattern in evangelicalism of targeting

autistic people, linking this to black-and-white thinking and the need for rigidity. Some connected their neurotype with their high levels of commitment to their former evangelical beliefs and practices. Kyle stated,

> I have ADHD. I was late diagnosed. So, I always had like this, like, rubbing against the boundaries and the rules and I didn't feel like I fit in. … And I didn't know where that came from. But when I left the church, like, my relationship with my own ADHD changed a lot because I think I became a lot more body aware. And so, like, all the things that the Church teaches you to ignore about your body, like, again, like, I grew up with the messaging around, like: the devil, the world, and your sinful flesh, like, all bad things to ignore. And so, like, I think there's this disconnect that's preached, that's taught, that's indoctrinated, encouraged – whatever word you want to use there. So I don't – I don't know about emotions, but I definitely know, like, the way I responded to my body got a lot different. And the way I understood my own ADHD shifted a lot.

Through acute and ongoing deconstruction, participants developed insight into their neurotypes and increased self-accommodation and self-awareness. Participants also found it beneficial to connect with other neurodivergent people.

Through deconstruction, participants acknowledged and confronted deficits in their senses of self and divested from their primary identities as evangelical Christians. During acute and ongoing deconstruction, participants learned about many facets of their identities and developed strengthened and more congruent senses of self. These areas of growth impacted participants' growing self-trust, which is described in the next section.

Self-Trust

Participants had incredible difficulty with self-trust during latent or pre-deconstruction and the beginning of acute deconstruction, including trusting their own experiences, morality, and decision making. Eli stated, “The self-doubt piece – it was really hard to trust my body, to trust my intuition, to even believe that it was worthy of investigating or pursuing any of these things.” Participants recalled being taught not to trust their instincts, bodies, emotions, thoughts, hearts, or perceptions. Some had shame around nudity or sexuality. Participants had internalized that, if they disagreed with anything, they must have been the problem – they must have been disobedient and outside of God’s will.

Through acute and ongoing deconstruction, participants found that they were able to develop and maintain self-trust and awareness of their physical, emotional, and cognitive processes. Will stated, “I’m not carrying around shame the way I used to. I can trust myself and my body.” Sue stated,

> I think if I was gonna tell anybody who’s coming out [of evangelicalism], it’s just, like, give yourself a lot of grace and, as much as you can, trust yourself. That’s what I feel like I’ve had to try to do is trust what I’m feeling, validate each thing that I’m feeling. Like, “This is stressful.” “This is hard.” “This triggered me.” Not just be like, “This triggered you because you’re stupid” – no, it’s like, “No, it’s fine, you’re allowed to feel things.”

Participants overwhelmingly described a shift to their own internal authority as a benefit of deconstructing. Sue said, “It’s just being good to people. I don’t need something outside of me to tell me that that’s what I want to do.” Participants’ self-trust, internal validation, and awareness and acceptance of their biopsychosocial processes increased through deconstruction.

Purpose

Participants' senses of purpose underwent meaningful development through deconstruction. Many stated that, in latent or pre-deconstruction, their understanding of their purpose in life was to be of service. Aria recalled,

> There was this acronym I learned in youth group, you know, 30 years ago or whatever: Jesus, Others, You equals "joy." And putting yourself last in all circumstances – and I've done that so much my whole life that putting myself first in anything is so foreign and so difficult for me. And if I'm modeling my life after a martyr, or someone who's been made into a martyr, then how am I supposed to take care of myself? How am I supposed to value myself? How am I supposed to have self-esteem when my entire identity is supposed to be held in someone other than me? And, you know, having that indoctrination as a youth, when you're supposed to be forming your sense of self and figuring out what you value and who you are – you know, that just set me on the wrong path, I feel like, for a long time. And it's only now, you know, when I've been a caregiver or a helper for so long, that I really sacrificed so many parts of myself over the years and had so many unhealthy relationships because of it, that I'm really consciously aware of how damaging that was and how inhibiting that was.

Participants described a sense of immense pressure to serve others whenever possible. Sophia's former preacher summarized this with the phrase, "Need seen? Assignment given." If participants observed a need or a way they could serve someone, their understanding was that it would be sinful not to follow through on the given act of service.

Participants stated that, through acute and ongoing deconstruction, they learned that they did not have to earn the right to take up space, earn love and affection, or "earn their keep" through service. Some participants still felt disproportionate pressure to use their time intentionally. Ruth noticed that she felt immense shame and guilt when her partner experienced struggling, feeling personally responsible for alleviating their discomfort. Participants encountered difficulty with learning to care for themselves and began to take more time for themselves and their physical, mental, emotional, relational, and vocational needs. Through acute and ongoing deconstruction, participants grew in the area of making meaning for themselves and cultivated a sense of purpose that was aligned with their value systems and newly developing social contexts.

Freedom

The most frequent mental health benefit of deconstruction cited by participants was a sense of freedom. This included freedom to determine one's own beliefs and actions, freedom from fear, freedom to change one's mind, and freedom from arbitrary limitations and punishments. Some participants noted that, having found this freedom, they had no intention of putting themselves in situations where they would be subject to indoctrination or coercive control again. Many participants had invested time and effort in cultivating this sense of freedom; Amy stated, "A big part of being an evangelical is seeking approval, so that's something I'm still working on in therapy." Eli stated,

> I think when your sense of self is based on a religion or a belief system like that, there's limits to it. Like, there's only so much you can add to that before you get called, like, sacrilegious, or like, idolizing something, you know? But I think now there's more freedom for me to, like, add other ingredients, and then

> also leave things behind if they no longer fit around identity or beliefs or just, like, how I see myself. There's more flexibility and agency there.

Sophia noted,

> I've felt more freedom to be myself and, like, again, I do and don't do things because I think they're right, and how I perceive the world and how I want to relate to people, versus somebody said that or it's written this way – we're supposed to do that or this. … You can change your mind once you get more information or circumstances change or you just don't want to do it anymore.

Some participants noted that no longer believing in evangelical doctrine – especially around God, themselves, and the afterlife – supported them in focusing on meaning, value, and impacting the world positively. Aria summarized,

> Thinking that day, all of a sudden, you know, "I don't believe in God anymore. I don't believe in anything to do with this anymore." – the freedom that brought was just a relief. I mean, I'd been experiencing so much existential dread for so long.

These increases in freedom were closely tied to participants' increased authenticity and openness, described below.

Authenticity

Participants highlighted becoming more authentic as another major benefit of deconstruction. They recalled prior decision making during latent or pre-deconstruction as based in automatic or forced responses, contrasted with their new patterns of genuine expression and relationship. Aria found that the Bible and her church had distanced her from her true self. Sophia stated, "Once I deconstructed myself from that, I almost felt like all the things that I tried

to fit so hard – and didn't – kind of fell away. And now I'm back to being who I truly felt like I was." Participants were able to begin expressing their true selves through relationships, art, music, and special interests. Many participants reached new levels of experiencing and expressing emotion rather than repressing their own inner states.

Openness

Participants cited openness as an additional benefit of their deconstruction processes, noting that they now could respect and engage with other expressions of spirituality, continue learning, and be empowered to integrate their learning into their lives. Participants were glad to be more open-minded and able to see and value others for who they are as people, not evaluating them based on their religious label or identity. Participants found that they were able to grow and change more profoundly because they removed the restrictions and limitations on their understanding of growth. Sue described this as having their figurative "blinders" removed – letting them see more, experience more, and embrace more diverse and rewarding relationships. Will stated, "My beliefs are not so fragile that I need to put them in a tower and then defend them at all costs. I am truly open to, like, if I'm wrong, I will reevaluate." This openness allowed for newly fostered critical thought patterns for participants.

Critical Thought

Participants had difficulty developing critical thought due to it being discouraged in their evangelical communities during latent or pre-deconstruction. Sarah stated that she had not truly developed critical thinking skills until her forties and that she wished she had been able to build these critical thinking skills much earlier in life when it was more developmentally appropriate. Participants discovered how meaningful it was to "grow up" and contrasted this with their church

communities not growing or evolving. Through acute and ongoing deconstruction, participants endorsed increased critical thought skills and patterns.

Mental Health Counseling

Mental health counseling was a crucial element of many participants' deconstruction processes. Some participants had engaged in Christian or pastoral counseling, primarily during latent or pre-deconstruction. Some experiences in counseling were helpful, clarifying, and validating, while others were more harmful than beneficial. This section discusses participants' descriptions of mental health counseling as supportive or as detrimental.

Counseling as Helpful during Deconstruction

Most participants recounted at least some supportive counseling relationships, approaches, or interventions. Participants found it especially helpful for counseling to allow for and embrace nuance. They also found counseling interventions focused on empowerment and boundaries to be helpful. Other beneficial focuses in counseling included processing, grieving, and unlearning purity culture; identity development; self as context; religious trauma processing and psychoeducation; body awareness; parts work; recognizing harmful patterns; inner child work; neurodiversity processing and psychoeducation; and processing interpersonal wounds and patterns.

To support her in navigating church-related anxiety, Danielle's counselor used an empty chair technique to help her imagine how she would respond to a hypothetical friend who was experiencing panic attacks in church. Danielle exclaimed to the empty chair, "Susie, you don't have to go to that church!" Danielle found this helpful, clarifying, and empowering. Some participants found counseling supportive for realizing that they did not have to share all of their

private thoughts and feelings with parents, church leaders, or others, and that they could be autonomous and define their own boundaries.

In addition to therapeutic approaches, participants noted the importance of their therapists' backgrounds and perspectives on religion. Participants varied in their perspectives on counselors' personal background; many participants found it helpful for their mental health counselors to be familiar with evangelical concepts and terminology. Many also found it helpful for their counselors to have personal experience or clinical expertise with deconstruction, which increased participants' senses of validation and instilled hope and confidence in the counseling process. Some participants sought out counselors with no religious affiliation. Celeste found it helpful for a counselor with limited knowledge of Christianity to assume a curious posture, to treat Celeste as the expert in her own experience, and to offer reflections such as,

> So, wait, in order for you to go to Heaven, you have to believe? And so, if you believe, that means you have to be in the right state of mind? And so, if you're not in the right state of mind, you go to hell? … That's not very unconditionally loving to me.

Avery found it helpful that their counselor integrated some Buddhist principles into his Christian practice, demonstrating that he had a broader perspective than one fully immersed in and limited to evangelicalism.

In addition to counseling, some participants had reached out for psychiatric support. Some had been prescribed antidepressants and other psychotropic medications at various points of deconstruction and found these supportive to their mental health. Some were still taking these prescribed medications, while others took them for a time and discontinued them.

Overall, participants found that supportive counselors tended to embrace complexity, focus on client empowerment, and maintain open and non-prescriptive approaches. These counseling relationships helped participants process interpersonal wounds related to deconstruction, understand religious indoctrination and trauma, develop congruent and strengthened identities, and move toward supportive interpersonal and intrapersonal patterns.

Counseling as Harmful during Deconstruction

While participants had some beneficial experiences in counseling, they also highlighted instances of harm. One area in which participants struggled with counseling was the difficulty they had finding mental health providers with clinical understanding or personal experiences of religious deconstruction. Aria noted that counselors she had worked with did not have adequate training or understanding of indoctrination; because her religious history was so profoundly impactful on all areas of her life, she found that counseling could not be effective without acknowledging and attending to the connections between religion, indoctrination, and all other factors of her mental health. Celeste stated that it was not helpful when a therapist with limited knowledge of Christianity continuously repeated the few characteristics she knew about evangelicalism, such as all-or-nothing thinking and control.

Experiences of harm by Christian counselors included accusing participants of having demonic spirits possessing them, attempting to convert LGBTQIA+ participants to being straight or cisgender, and being overly directive and prescriptive, compromising participants' autonomy. Aria stated that a counselor bringing their own religious values into the counseling space was intensely violating, even if the therapist and client shared a religious identity. She added that Christian counseling was more harmful than not engaging in counseling at all.

Detrimental experiences in counseling primarily centered around compromising client autonomy, instilling counselor values, and centering the counselor as the expert in the client's needs, goals, and experiences. Some participants suffered lasting effects of harmful counseling and had difficulty building trust with mental health professionals due to previous experiences of harm.

Summary

This constructivist grounded theory study explored the process of religious deconstruction. This chapter described patterns within participants' religious deconstruction processes, including the nature of the overall process, major shifts in participants' religious and spiritual beliefs and practices, and intra- and interpersonal facets of deconstruction. These themes were highly interconnected and complex in nature.

Chapter IV: Discussion

This constructivist grounded theory study explored the process of deconstructing previously held evangelical Christian beliefs. Research had addressed experiences and processes related to religious doubt, deconversion, and disaffiliation (Barbour, 1994; Gull, 2022; Upenieks, 2021); however, a research gap remained regarding the nature and process of religious deconstruction. The limited literature that had addressed religious deconstruction was primarily non-empirical, highlighting a misalignment between empirical inquiry and the prevalent trend of evangelical Christians deconstructing their religious beliefs and practices. Many of the themes and processes in religious deconstruction in this study mirrored the gestalt of literature around religious doubt and disaffiliation; this study contributed to the existing gap by exploring religious deconstruction as defined and characterized by those who self-identified as having navigated the process themselves. New concepts emerging from this study included the importance of evangelicalism as the social context for deconstruction, as well as the unique stages, shifts, and psychosocial dynamics related to deconstruction.

Chapter III presented an overview of the religious deconstruction process. This chapter will discuss these results in the context of existing research, offer implications for the mental health field, evaluate this study's limitations and strengths, and provide recommendations for future research. These findings were co-constructed in collaboration with the research participants, who reviewed and provided feedback on the researcher's preliminary findings as the researcher generated insights and conceptualizations based on participant data.

Key Findings

This research revealed insights about religious deconstruction for individuals from evangelical Christian backgrounds. These insights included the nature and sequence of the

deconstruction process, the importance of evangelicalism as the social context for deconstruction, major patterns in shifts in belief and practice, and relational and mental health dynamics related to deconstruction. Both deconstruction and reconstruction of belief, practice, and identity were integral to participants' religious deconstruction processes. Participants did not differentiate between or separate deconstruction and reconstruction, so these findings will refer broadly to the whole process as "religious deconstruction."

Processes in religious deconstruction reflected those in deconstructivist philosophy as developed by Derrida (1967) and applied by Brons (2015) and Lurcza (2014). Evangelicalism was characterized by binaries, absolutism, authority, dominance, exclusion, and institutional and social hierarchies. Religious deconstruction was a process of critical analysis of evangelicalism as a worldview and lifestyle, breaking down rigid beliefs and traditional behaviors, and rebuilding patterns of belief, behavior, and connection.

This theory of religious deconstruction situates the deconstruction process in the social context of evangelical culture; patterns in evangelicalism served as the backdrop for religious deconstruction and impacted all processes within religious deconstruction. Within this context, some approximate stages and specific shifts in belief, practice, and identity emerged. These shifts and stages were intricately intertwined with relational and mental health dynamics. While this manuscript explores these components of religious deconstruction individually, the researcher emphasizes their highly interconnected nature. These key findings will highlight some examples of the relationships between these constructs and the meaning participants made of them.

Evangelicalism as Social Context

The first emergent theme was the importance of social and cultural patterns in evangelicalism as critical context for participants' deconstruction processes. Evangelicalism had

informed and shaped all areas of participants' lives, consistent with Nye's (2008, p. 3) conceptualization of religion as a framework for believers' daily lives. Findings related to evangelicalism as participants' social context aligned with constructivist focuses on social and cultural context, identity, and background in meaning making and interpreting experiences (Jones et al., 2014). These patterns constituted a unique setting in which participants found their self-concepts and meaning making in misalignment with their evangelical social context.

First, participants identified toxic positivity and spiritual bypassing as patterns in evangelicalism involving the rejection of experiences and expressions of any emotions that were deemed negative; participants' former evangelical communities had treated difficult feelings as indicators of sin and of misalignment with God's will or instruction. This contributed to emotional suppression, dissociation, and a sense of shame for experiencing emotions. Due to the rejection of emotions, participants struggled to express themselves in relationships, fearing rejection and judgment. This pattern also seemed to delay deconstruction processes by prompting participants to repress any sense of discomfort or dissonance and to attribute distress or doubt to their own sinfulness or inadequacy.

The attitudes toward emotions described above were also connected with the rejection of mental health supports, such as counseling, medication, and psychoeducation. Participants were denied mental health care upon their requests and were often instructed to instead pray or seek church guidance. Delegitimizing mental health needs and treatment reinforced dependency on the evangelical community and delayed participants' processes of recognizing and responding to their own distress and misalignment with evangelicalism.

Interpersonal harm emerged as another theme in participants' descriptions of evangelical culture. This included pervasive hypocrisy, where local and global Christian leaders would

preach about love and demonstrate selfish, rude, and abusive behavior in private. Participants noted that their former evangelical communities had declined to provide practical, empowering support in times of need, but would foster continued reliance on the church by offering prayer or resources with strings attached. Observations of hypocrisy contributed to confusion and disillusionment, as well as to interpersonal harm and difficulty trusting others; accounts of hypocrisy echoed participants' broader critiques of institutional religion and served as a flashpoint for many participants' moral dissonance and deconstruction.

Participants described rampant abuses of control, including violations of consent and patterns of perpetuating, hiding, and allowing abuse. These patterns reflected deeply embedded power hierarchies within evangelical systems; these structures both shaped and constrained participants' senses of agency. The repeated violation of consent, particularly by authority figures, underlined the systemic nature of spiritual abuse and was both emotionally and relationally wounding and traumatic. Participants confronted internal conflict as they reflected on their time in evangelicalism and the ways in which they had violated the autonomy of others because of their beliefs; participants struggled with their previous actions – such as proselytizing, compromising others' agency, and rejecting those whose behavior they deemed sinful – which had been rooted in their inherited belief systems and were in opposition to many of their personal core values. They also identified unethical, narcissistic, and predatory behaviors by evangelical church leaders. Some participants labeled their former evangelical communities as cults, highlighting their controlling, predatory, and exclusionary nature. Abuse in evangelicalism was institutional as well as individual; evangelical structures enabled, concealed, and normalized predatory behaviors. These abuses of control kept participants in evangelical churches despite their distress by limiting social support and resources outside the evangelical community,

stressing the absolute truth of their doctrine and interpretation of the Bible, and emphasizing participants' lack of understanding and inherent sinfulness and worthlessness. Patterns of abuse and control also contributed to a lack of agency, autonomy, and self-trust.

Another pattern in evangelicalism was around prejudice, discrimination, and exclusion. This included biases against Black, Indigenous, Hispanic, Asian and other people of color; LGBTQIA+ people; and women. Some expressions of prejudice and discrimination were more covert, such as tokenization of people of minoritized racial or ethnic identities or white-centric views of normalcy; others were more overt, such as not allowing women or LGBTQIA+ people to hold ministry positions or asserting that all Black people were violent and all poor people were lazy. These biases were often a source of internal conflict and prevented participants from accessing diverse relationships and community. These biases also seemed to contribute to the tendency for participants to deconstruct their religious beliefs simultaneously with deconstructing broader systems of oppression and marginalization, such as white supremacy.

Participants highlighted purity culture as an additional facet of evangelical culture framing their deconstruction processes. They found that purity culture objectified people – especially women and girls – and made women and girls out to be responsible for men's behavior and purity. Related teachings placed heavy emphases on virginity and on rejecting and repressing sexual urges, physical autonomy, and body awareness; this contributed to difficulty with embodiment and feeling in charge of one's own body. This was also an area in which participants noticed a powerful misalignment between their beliefs and experiences, as participants found sexual intimacy outside of purity culture's parameters fulfilling instead of damaging.

Finally, participants discussed political attitudes as harmful patterns within evangelicalism. Participants highlighted evangelical infiltration of United States government and politics and Christian nationalism (Zhou, 2023) as framing their deconstruction processes. They became supporters of reproductive healthcare, abortion access, same-sex marriage, social programs, immigrant rights, and other human rights causes, which are antagonized by evangelical leaders as a threat to American families and traditions (Anderson, 2015; Banwart, 2013). Evangelical support of Donald Trump in particular emerged as a pattern that participants found hypocritical and harmful, which contributed to many participants' disillusionment and their determination not to align themselves with evangelicalism moving forward.

Evangelicalism as the social context was critical for understanding participants' deconstruction processes. As Nye (2008) affirms, religion cannot be separated from its cultural, historical, or social context. Patterns in participants' former evangelical communities informed each stage of their religious deconstruction and provided a necessary framework through which to view the shifts they underwent in their beliefs and practices.

Deconstruction Process

In addition to the critical context of evangelicalism, some themes emerged in the overall nature of the religious deconstruction process. The process of religious deconstruction was idiosyncratic and largely non-linear. The order, speed, and depth of participants' navigation of the aspects of deconstruction varied in connection with unique intersections of surrounding evangelical culture, the relevance of specific beliefs and practices, dynamics in relationships, and participants' mental health. While some of these intersections will be highlighted in this section, the gestalt of these intricate connections is nuanced and individualized and cannot be represented in a way that fully encapsulates the deconstruction process of each participant. Rather, this

section will provide an overview of the process of religious deconstruction while attempting to honor the distinctiveness of each person's deconstruction journey.

Findings were consistent with Herrington's (2024) description of deconstruction as a highly individualized and complex process involving social context and personal identity. Themes in religious deconstruction aligned with literature on deconstructivism as it incorporated dismantling of binaries, hierarchies, and exclusion (Brons 2015; Derrida, 1967; Lurcza, 2014). Participants' religious deconstruction processes were intertwined with the deconstruction of oppressive systems and hierarchies, such as white supremacy and patriarchy. This is because it is likely intertwined with sociopolitical ideologies, leading participants to question not only their spiritual framework but also the broader systems of dominance it implicitly upheld. Findings were consistent with Marti and Ganiel's (2014) description of deconstruction as incorporating awareness of complexity in religion and culture and rejecting institutions, hierarchies, shallowness, hypocrisy, and rigidity.

Despite the idiosyncratic nature of participants' religious deconstruction processes, they fit into three general stages: latent or pre-deconstruction, acute deconstruction, and ongoing deconstruction. During latent or pre-deconstruction, participants were highly committed to evangelicalism, consistent with the finding that highly committed Christians may go through increased religious distress (Verhoeff-Korpershoek et al., 2023) and that those who deconstruct are vastly familiar with the Bible (The Deconstruction Network, 2020). Most participants had been brought up in intensely religious families and had been immersed in evangelicalism for the duration of their upbringing.

This high level of engagement in and commitment to their evangelical communities and beliefs during latent or pre-deconstruction was despite experiences of cognitive dissonance and

unconscious and conscious questioning. Evangelical community and culture often prevented participants from actively deconstructing, consistent with Mehta and Mishra's (2024) finding that religion reinforces belonging and commitment. Participants leaned heavily into their evangelical beliefs because they were their only source of purpose, identity, and meaning making; similarly, participants immersed themselves in evangelical community because it was their only source of social belonging and support. During this stage, participants did not feel free or safe to explore or question their evangelical beliefs due to threats such as eternal torment and interpersonal rejection.

A variety of factors contributed to the transition from latent or pre-deconstruction to acute deconstruction, including exposure to religious and cultural diversity, increased critical thought, experiences of harm, and dissatisfaction with evangelical teachings, history, culture, and politics. This was consistent with findings that disillusionment with evangelicalism (Gull, 2022; Jankowski et al., 2023), intellectual dissatisfaction (Williams, 2023), and religious distress (Gull, 2022) may preempt religious questioning or disaffiliation. Acute deconstruction often involved a period of increased distress, consistent with Herrington's (2024) description of deconstruction as vulnerable and grief laden. During acute deconstruction, participants went through major renegotiations of their beliefs and practices; some moved from evangelicalism to more progressive, liturgical, or structured expressions of Christianity or to Atheism or Agnosticism. These endeavors were in search of restored senses of meaning, purpose, community, and hope.

During ongoing deconstruction, participants felt more settled in their renegotiated beliefs and practices, while still engaged in unlearning and deconstructing the deeply rooted beliefs, biases, and social rules engrained during their time in evangelicalism. This sequence was consistent with applications of Derrida's deconstructionist philosophy to religion, including

critical analysis and the renegotiation and challenging of beliefs and doctrine (Rassool, 2023; Williams, 2023).

Shifts in Belief

The renegotiation of previously held beliefs was essential to the deconstruction process, consistent with Campbell's (2020) findings around spiritual struggles. In alignment with deconstructivism's critique of binaries and logocentrism (Derrida, 1967), participants engaged in critical analysis of their established worldviews and the hierarchies and simplified binaries found in their former evangelical beliefs. Participants reshaped their interpretations of their own experiences and deconstructed and reconstructed their beliefs and practices. Specifically, participants shifted their beliefs about God, the Bible, human nature, and the afterlife, as well as social constructs, relationships, and behaviors; these belief shifts were not isolated but occurred in tandem with changes in participants' spiritual practices, social contexts, relationships, and mental health. As participants questioned inherited doctrines, they simultaneously renegotiated how they understood themselves, others, and the world around them. These interconnected shifts marked a departure from rigid and externally imposed frameworks toward more fluid, personally meaningful systems of belief, often characterized by increased autonomy, internal congruence, and emotional well-being. In this way, shifting beliefs acted as both a consequence of deconstruction and a catalyst for reconstruction.

Participants navigated drastic shifts in their beliefs about God through deconstruction. During latent or pre-deconstruction, many conceptualized God as distant, judgmental, and angry. Latent or pre-deconstruction views of God were confusing and contradictory: on one hand, all-loving and ready to provide blessing and favor, while on the other hand, sadistic, frightening, and ready to punish. Some participants moved toward views of God centered around love and mercy,

while others found that their conceptualization of and belief in the evangelical Christian God simply faded away. Participants' current beliefs varied, with some participants not believing in God at all and others broadening or shifting their views of God; however, all participants dismantled and rejected the evangelical conceptualization of God's character and nature.

Beliefs about the Bible also shifted significantly through deconstruction. Participants discontinued belief in the Bible as inerrant, written by God, and supernaturally preserved, which are primary beliefs in evangelicalism (Kidd, 2019). Many, upon learning about the canonization, editing, and politicization of the Bible, rejected the Bible as divine and perfect. Participants decentered the Bible, no longer considering it an authority over their lives.

Additionally, participants shifted their beliefs about humanity and human nature through deconstruction. Participants rejected the beliefs that humans were inherently depraved, wicked, or deserving of eternal conscious torture and thus needing God's salvation – another core tenet of evangelicalism (Kidd, 2019). They also rejected exclusionary "us versus them" attitudes that treated non-Christians as evil and to be avoided. Participants deconstructed beliefs about the human body being evil and focused their beliefs on human beings' inherent value and worthiness of respect and care.

Some other specific themes in shifting beliefs emerged. These included no longer believed in hell or in eternal conscious torment because of not being saved. Regarding social roles and expectations, participants no longer ascribed to gender roles, became affirming of LGBTQIA+ relationships and identities, rejected self-sacrificing service as a person's primary purpose, and centered autonomy, safety, and empowerment in their views of parenting. Participants also overwhelmingly moved away from conservative and Republican views and

became supporters of social programs, racial justice, reproductive healthcare, LGBTQIA+ rights, and environmental sustainability.

In addition to renegotiating specific beliefs, participants shifted their beliefs about religion and spirituality in general. They reframed their prior experiences during latent or pre-deconstruction, often reconceptualizing times they believed they felt God's presence as moments in which they sensed community belonging, powerful music, or their own self-soothing. Most participants broadened their conceptualization of a personal relationship with God, which Zhou (2023) defines as direct communication with God, to connection with themselves, the earth, and other living beings. Participants' belief systems deviated from their former evangelical worldviews and were more congruent and fulfilling, consistent with Campbell's (2020) findings on navigating religious distress.

Shifts in Practice and Spiritual Identity

All participants changed their engagement in spiritual practice and expression. Participants shifted from practices such as Bible reading, prayer, communal worship, and church attendance to practices that were more aligned with their values and self-concepts; these shifts intersected with participants' evangelical social contexts, shifts in belief, relationships, and mental health in complex ways. Findings were consistent with Manglos-Weber's (2024) conclusion that those who deconstruct move toward embodiment practices. Participants' practices in the ongoing deconstruction stage were more eclectic and flexible than during the latent or pre-deconstruction stage and focused on kindness, community, nature, and human rights. This was consistent with Manglos-Weber's (2024) finding that deconstructing includes a move toward syncretism, engagement with nature, and social activism. Participants integrated practices rooted in other belief systems, such as Paganism, as well as community care and self-

care. Findings were also consistent with Drysdale's (The Deconstruction Network, 2020) definition of deconstruction as resulting in decreased rigidity.

Participants tended to identify more as spiritual than religious, consistent with conceptualizations of spirituality as less rigid, less formal, less institutional, and more eclectic than religion (Pargament et al., 2013; Peng-Keller, 2010). Participants no longer identified as born again, an important element of evangelicalism (Kidd, 2019). However, participant identities varied and included spiritual, reverent, Christian Universalist, Atheist, Atheopagan, and Agnostic. No participants identified as evangelical. Participants no longer engaged in evangelism, a major focus of evangelicalism (National Association of Evangelicals, n.d.). Participants had substantially increased spiritual autonomy, consistent with Gull's (2022) findings.

Relational Dynamics

Relational dynamics were an integral and impactful component of deconstruction and were interconnected with evangelicalism as participants' social context, shifts in belief and practice, and participants' mental health. Interpersonal experiences served as motivating factors for some shifts in deconstruction, while some deconstruction processes contributed to relational shifts.

As reflected in literature around religious doubt and disaffiliation, deconstruction involved acute and intense relational loss, juxtaposed with drastic increases in relational congruence and satisfaction over time (Wild, 2021). Religious deconstruction involved significant interpersonal rejection and the loss of participants' communities and social support. Participants experienced conflict, rejection, and betrayal in their relationships with their families of origin, friends, and church communities, consistent with Wild's (2021) finding that those who

disaffiliate experience minoritization and rejection. Deconstruction tended to be extremely isolating, at the beginning of acute deconstruction. Participants experienced conflict with friends and families of origin; some had families and friends abruptly cut off contact or disown them because of their deconstruction. Ongoing conflict and relational discomfort were primary challenges of deconstruction. Participants had difficulty communicating with evangelical loved ones and acquaintances about their deconstruction, establishing boundaries, and balancing anger and betrayal with empathy and understanding for the perspectives of those still in evangelicalism.

Through deconstruction, participants redefined community and unlearned old patterns of relationship, such as codependence, inauthenticity, always putting oneself last, and judging others. Participants found their skills for assertive communication, boundaries, and openness were previously underdeveloped. As they deconstructed these former relational patterns, participants developed these skills and cultivated relationships that were more safe, supportive, open, and authentic than those in their former communities. Over time, participants connected with and developed new communities which reflected their shifts in belief, practice, identity, and openness.

Relational wellness often decreased at the beginning of acute deconstruction; however, all participants reported increased relational health overall. This was consistent with Nica's (2020) finding that those who disaffiliate tend to have their social relationships decline before they eventually improve. Participants engaged in relationships more freely and authentically, consistent with Campbell's (2020) findings. Those who were able to find and connect with others who were deconstructing found these relationships immensely validating and helpful;

most participants stated that finding other people with similar deconstruction experiences was difficult and rare.

Mental Health

Mental health emerged as a central, driving force throughout participants' deconstruction journeys, shaping both the unraveling of evangelical beliefs and the reconstruction of more authentic identities, relationships, and coping. Mental health was also deeply impacted by the worldviews, roles, and self-concepts that had been ingrained during participants' upbringings in evangelicalism. While all participants reported improved mental health because of deconstruction, many participants experienced worsened mental health prior to this eventual improvement. This was consistent with Upenieks's (2021) finding that initial emotional distress evolved into personal self-actualization, clarity, and relief over time. Most participants endorsed trauma related to their former evangelical communities and beliefs. Mental health either improved with acute and ongoing deconstruction or decreased with the onset of acute deconstruction before improving overall. Distress during acute deconstruction was largely connected with interpersonal rejection, consistent with Björkmark's et al. (2021) finding that, for those who disaffiliate, suffering is primarily related to other people rejecting and shaming the disaffiliated person.

Many participants dealt with anxiety. Participants found that social pressure and the threats of eternity, hell, the rapture, tribulations, God's anger, and God's punishment contributed to their high levels of anxiety. Some participants had obsessive-compulsive disorder or related symptoms, including scrupulosity. Compulsions included prayer, repentance, and seeking reassurance, while obsessions included fears of sinning, angering God, and not being or doing enough. Factors contributing to depressive symptoms or disorders included senses of

worthlessness apart from God, low senses of agency and autonomy, and shame regarding participants' own humanity.

While anxiety was the most frequently discussed mental health concern, participants endorsed various other symptoms and diagnoses. Some had struggled with depressive symptoms during latent or pre-deconstruction or at the beginning of acute deconstruction; they believed these symptoms were associated with shame, lack of agency, and conditions of worth. Many also had trauma, complex trauma, relational trauma, or religious trauma; this was most often associated with relational wounds and the threats of sin, hell, demons, and God's wrath. Some participants endorsed dissociative symptoms connected with the repression of threatening, incongruent, or unsafe emotions, cognitions, or experiences.

During latent or pre-deconstruction, participants experienced profound cognitive dissonance as they held misaligned beliefs, identities, and relationships. Common themes around cognitive dissonance included not feeling God's presence, reckoning with the condemnation of abortion, same-sex marriage, LGBTQIA+ rights, and immigrant rights. Cognitive dissonance dissipated as participants shifted their beliefs and practices to ones that were more congruent.

Identity and Self-Concept

During latent or pre-deconstruction, participants had little sense of their identities and endorsed overall negative self-concepts, low self-worth, and struggles with self-trust. They did not have a sense of who they were except that they were worthless and evil without God's redemption. They reported an inability to articulate or trust their emotions, cognitions, or physical sensations. Participants also noted that they had underdeveloped senses of identity that were nearly exclusively rooted in their evangelical Christianity, resulting in a profound sense of loss upon no longer identifying as evangelical. This was consistent with the constructivist

perspective that abrupt change may be experienced as a loss, which prompts a person to reorganize and shift to a restored sense of identity (Mahoney & Granvold, 2005).

Although they struggled with identity formation – especially during acute deconstruction – participants reconstructed strong senses of who they were, their core values, and their personal traits, morals, needs, goals, and strengths. Participants also cultivated awareness and integration of their cultural, gender, sexual, and neurodiverse identities. Through acute and ongoing deconstruction, participants developed awareness and trust in their own emotional, cognitive, and physical processes and experiences. This promoted decreased shame and increased autonomy.

Through acute and ongoing deconstruction, participants developed supportive and congruent senses of meaning and purpose. Participants' sense of purpose moved from existing to serve God and others, while always reducing their own individuality and needs, to a robust sense of purpose aligned with their values of honoring and meeting their own needs as well as supporting their communities. All participants emphasized beneficial mental health outcomes associated with their deconstruction processes. Primary benefits of deconstruction included freedom, autonomy, authenticity, openness, critical thought, and decreased fear.

Counseling

This study found that participants sought out counseling to support them through all stages of deconstruction, consistent with research on those who experience religious doubts and shifts (Campbell, 2020; Post & Wade, 2009). Participants' counseling experiences and outcomes varied; factors contributing to counseling as beneficial or harmful are discussed below.

Helpful counseling relationships emphasized client autonomy and expertise in their own experience. Participants found it supportive for counselors to embrace nuance and complexity and to assume curious, open postures. Participants benefited from normalizing and verbally

processing spiritual struggles, consistent with Gear's et al. (2009) guidelines for counseling for spiritual struggles. Beneficial focuses included psychoeducation, verbal processing, inner child and parts work, and recovery from grief and trauma. Some participants felt most supported by counselors with no religious affiliation or experience; others preferred their counselors to have personal experiences with deconstruction or some familiarity with evangelicalism.

Participants found it harmful for counselors to underestimate the pervasiveness of evangelicalism and the broad impacts of deconstruction. Some noted that most counselors had no training in indoctrination and its mental health impacts. Participants with experience with Christian counselors found it harmful for their counselors to affirm or promote their own value systems, even if it was the same or very similar to the participants' own beliefs. This is misaligned with the Association of Christian Counselors' (2023) guidelines of promoting the authority of the Bible and prescribing behaviors based on Bible texts. Other adverse experiences in counseling included highly directive or prescriptive interventions, conversion therapy, accusations of demon possession, and biblically-based interventions.

Implications

This study has implications for mental health treatment for those at all stages of deconstruction. This section identifies implications for counselors, Christian counselors, and counselor educators.

Counselors

This study highlighted the importance of counselors' awareness of the religious deconstruction process. Mental health counselors can support this population by developing awareness of patterns in evangelical culture and the specific mental health challenges that can arise for individuals who are immersed in it; these challenges included anxiety, depressive

symptoms, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, scrupulosity, moral perfectionism, trauma, interpersonal wounds, cognitive dissonance, low self-trust, inauthenticity, and underdeveloped critical thought.

Counselors may also increase their awareness of the potential for intense periods of crisis during the acute deconstruction stage, especially related to the abrupt loss of family and social supports, religious coping skills, and a secure sense of meaning, purpose, and hope. While this increase in distress was not present for all participants and was temporary in nature, it had a destabilizing effect that warranted additional protective factors, psychoeducation, validation, and instillation of hope.

Issues that may arise for deconstructing clients include struggling to accept, experience, and express difficult emotions. In their relationships, they may exhibit insecure attachment, people pleasing, difficulty trusting others, relational trauma, underdeveloped boundaries, and unlearning prejudice and biases. Intrapersonally, they may have difficulty with self-trust, low autonomy, trauma-related symptoms, shame, disconnection from the body, underdeveloped sense of morality, low self-worth, and perfectionism.

Counselors can support those who are deconstructing by embracing nuance and complexity. Supportive interventions may address cultivating inner resources and social supports. Due to overlapping experiences and symptoms, deconstructing individuals may benefit from interventions rooted in recovery from grief, trauma, abuse, and cults. Helpful approaches can empower the client to develop their own sense of self, trust their body, and build social contexts that are congruent with their value system.

Psychoeducation for deconstructing clients could include information about the process and stages of deconstruction, indoctrination, the non-linear nature of the process, the availability

of relevant media and groups, and the positive mental health outcomes associated with deconstruction. It may also include information about the relevant risk factors and protective factors. For example, someone in latent or pre-deconstruction may benefit from acknowledgement of the social rejection that could result from openness about their deconstruction, as well as the potential for cultivating new community that is more authentic and life-giving. Counselors can recognize privilege and intersectional identities and acknowledge the realistic risk of community rejection and resulting loss of resources that deconstructing individuals may face.

Counselors can recognize the all-encompassing nature of evangelicalism and the deconstruction process. Religious deconstruction did not merely impact participants' religious and spiritual wellness; it affected their cognitive, behavioral, social, psychological, physical, sexual, emotional, and other areas of life. Deconstructing evangelical teachings was intertwined with deconstructing oppressive systems, such as white supremacy and patriarchy. Counselors may increase their awareness of the interconnectedness of evangelicalism and political dynamics in the United States and how this may present ongoing complications for those who deconstruct their evangelical beliefs.

Counselors may support deconstructing clients by normalizing ongoing unlearning and growth throughout the lifespan. They can emphasize that recurrence of various deconstruction processes does not indicate regression. Similar to how trauma may emerge as needing to be reprocessed, those who deconstruct may revisit elements of the deconstruction process over time, especially as they relate to social domains.

Counselors may also support deconstructing clients by increasing their own familiarity with evangelical teachings and culture. A working knowledge of relevant terminology, rituals,

and interpersonal dynamics, coupled with an unassuming approach that views the client as the expert in their own experiences, can facilitate an empowering therapeutic environment for clients navigating deconstruction. Counselors can also build familiarity with the stages of religious deconstruction, while honoring the unique and idiosyncratic nature of each person's process.

Christian and Pastoral Counselors

Christian and pastoral counselors may support deconstructing clients by recognizing the potential for harm in invalidating clients' expressions of doubt, questioning, shifting beliefs and practices, and critical thought. Instead, they can help clients by validating religious deconstruction as a viable and efficacious path, especially for those with evangelical beliefs who present with cognitive dissonance, anxiety, depressive symptoms, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, or difficulty with self-trust. They may also recognize that deconstruction does not indicate that a person did not ever take their religion seriously. Cultivating a safe environment for exploring beliefs and practices can support clients in decreasing cognitive dissonance. Christian and pastoral counselors can recognize that entering acute deconstruction is not necessarily an active choice, but that it can feel involuntary. Another way to support deconstructing clients is by not engaging in spiritual bypassing or minimizing or invalidating interpersonal wounds and internal struggles. Validating mental health challenges and diagnoses may also support clients.

Counselor Educators

This study also had implications for counselor educators. The findings of this study highlight the importance of teaching through a multicultural lens, including considerations for clients' spiritual journeys and faith identities. This is consistent with the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs' (2024) emphasis on

multicultural counseling and contexts. This study also demonstrated the harmful impact of instilling one's own values in working with their clients, consistent with the American Counseling Association's (2014, Section A.4.b.) instruction for counselors not to impose their own beliefs.

Limitations

Although the researcher made efforts to promote trustworthiness, this study had several limitations. These must be considered with regard to the applicability of these findings and the direction of future research. Limitations of this study included potential researcher bias, a lack of racial and ethnic diversity, the language used for recruitment and participant selection, and an incomplete picture of participant demographics.

The researcher acknowledges the potential influence of unconscious assumptions and biases, especially given their personal experiences with being raised in evangelical Christianity and navigating religious deconstruction. The researcher also had relevant professional experience prior to the current study, including clinical mental health counseling and empirical research focused on religious and spiritual distress, deconstruction, and identity development. To address potential bias, the researcher engaged in continuous reflexivity throughout the study, acknowledging their positionality and how it may have shaped the research process. The researcher also engaged in self-reflection and reflexive journaling after interviews and during the coding process and maintained practices of bridling, transparency, and memoing; in doing so, the researcher checked for assumptions, emotional responses, and any themes not firmly rooted in participant data.

A second limitation of this study was a lack of racial and ethnic diversity, since participants were predominantly white. While this reflects the estimate that a vast majority of

evangelical Christians in the United States are white (Pew Research Center, 2015), Black, Indigenous, Hispanic, Asian and other people of color were largely unrepresented in this study. Participants mainly had experiences in churches with predominantly white populations.

Another limitation of this study is the sampling criterion of self-identification as having deconstructed previously held evangelical Christian beliefs. There may be those who have engaged in religious deconstruction as portrayed in this study, but who would not self-identify as having deconstructed. Additionally, the term "evangelical" may have been a limiting factor, since many people who meet the generally accepted criteria for being evangelical do not actually identify with the term (Kidd, 2019).

Incomplete demographics presented a final limitation of this study. The Interest Form included the limited demographic items of pronouns, gender, racial/ethnic identities, and state of residence. Because of the semi-structured nature of the interviews, not all participants spoke about the same demographics or identifiers. For example, many participants stated during their interviews that they were LGBTQIA+, had diagnoses of ADHD, and were mental health counselors. However, it cannot be inferred whether participants who did not mention these traits or identifiers fit into the same or different categories.

Future Research

While this study contributed to the gap in research related to religious deconstruction, it also highlighted the need for additional empirical exploration. Research is needed that explores religious deconstruction processes for racial and ethnic minoritized groups, various age groups, neurodiverse identities, specific religious denominations, and more narrow geographic locations. Additional research could address deconstruction of other religions and varied systems of oppression.

Additional research is needed to explore the religious and spiritual identities, beliefs, and practices of those who deconstruct, as well as their counseling experiences and outcomes. Future studies with larger sample sizes may provide insight into the demographic characteristics of those who deconstruct. Research should further explore overarching categories of this study, such as the stages of deconstruction, patterns in evangelical culture, major shifts in beliefs and practices of those who deconstruct, relational dynamics related to deconstruction, mental health dynamics related to deconstruction, and counseling for people at each stage of deconstruction.

Conclusion

This study explored the process of deconstructing previously held evangelical beliefs using constructivist grounded theory methodology. Despite the complex and idiosyncratic nature of religious deconstruction, consistent themes and patterns emerged in participants' deconstruction processes. These included patterns in participants' former evangelical social contexts, shifts in belief and practice, and impactful relational and mental health dynamics. The researcher discussed the findings of the study as they related to existing research and identified implications for the counseling field and for future research. This study aimed to increase understanding, representation, and efficacious counseling and research for the increasingly large group of those who deconstruct.

References

Abes, E. S. (2009). Theoretical borderlands: Using multiple theoretical perspectives to challenge inequitable power structures in student development theory. *Journal of College Student Development, 50*(2), 141–156.

Adam, R. J. (2009). 'Leaving the fold': Apostacy from fundamentalism and the direction of religious development. *Australian Religion Studies Review, 22*(1), 42-63.

Albertsen, E. J., O'connor, L. E., & Berry, J. W. (2006). Religion and interpersonal guilt: Variations across ethnicity and spirituality. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture, 9*(1), 67-84.

American Association of Christian Counselors, (2023, October). *AACC Code of Ethics*. https://aacc.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/AACC_Code-of-Ethics-2023_FINAL.pdf

American Counseling Association. (2014). *2014 ACA code of ethics.* https://www.counseling.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/ethics/2014-aca-code-of-ethics.pdf

Anderson, D. (2015). Damaged goods: New perspectives on Christian purity. Jericho Books

Arel, S. N. (2016). *Affect theory, shame, and Christian formation*. Springer International Publishing.

Barbour, I. G. (1994). Experiencing and interpreting nature in science and religion. *Zygon, 29*(4), 457-487.

Bartoli, E., & Gillem, A. R. (2008). Continuing to depolarize the debate on sexual orientation and religion: Identity and the therapeutic process. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 39*(2), 202.

Beider, N. (2023). Religious residue: The impact of childhood religious socialization on the religiosity of nones in France, Germany, Great Britain, and Sweden. *The British Journal of Sociology*, *74*(1), 50-69.

Björkmark, M., Koskinen, C. A. L., Nynäs, P., & Nyholm, L. (2021). Suffering of life after religious disaffiliation: A caring science study. *International Journal of Caring Sciences, 14*(1), 1-7

Bloomberg, L. D., & Volpe, M. F. (2019). Completing your qualitative dissertation: A road map from beginning to end (4th ed.). Sage.

Brons, L. L. (2015). Othering, an analysis. *Transcience, a Journal of Global Studies*, *6*(1), 69-90.

Brown-Iannuzzi, J. L., McKee, S., & Gervais, W. M. (2018). Atheist horns and religious halos: Mental representations of atheists and theists. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, *147*(2), 292.

Bryant, A. N. (2007). The effects of involvement in campus religious communities on college student adjustment and development. *Journal of College and Character*, *8*(3), 1-25.

Buda, D. (2021). Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism: An overview of their relationship from the perspective of moral values. *Religions*, *12*(6), 383.

Burleigh, N. (2018, July 13). *Evangelical Christians helped elect Donald Trump, but their time as a major political force is coming to an end*. Newsweek, July 13. https://www.newsweek.com/2018/12/21/evangelicals-republicans-trumpmillenials-1255745.html

Campbell, M. (2020). *Clients' experience of the therapeutic relationship and a counselor's way of being on the resolution of religious and spiritual struggles: A hermeneuctical phenomenological study*. (Doctoral dissertation, Texas Christian University).

Cavanaugh, W. T. (2009). *The myth of religious violence*. Oxford University Press, New York.

Charmaz, K. (2003). Grounded theory. In Smith, J. A. (Ed.), *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods* (pp. 81–110). Sage Publications, Inc.

Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory*. Sage.

Childers, A., & Barnett, T. (2024). *The deconstruction of Christianity: What it is, why it's destructive, and how to respond.* Tyndale Elevate.

Choi, Y. (2023). *Preventing shincheonji heresy through biblically sound Christian education: The case of Saerom Baptist Church* (Doctoral dissertation, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary).

Coffman, E. J. (2013). *The Christian century and the rise of the Protestant mainline*. Oxford University Press.

CohenMiller, A., & Boivin, N. (2021). *Questions in qualitative social justice research in multicultural contexts*. Routledge.

Cole, M. (2023). Psychological effects of Christian teachings about sin and hell. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, *26*(8), 736-754.

Corbin, J. (2021). Strauss' grounded theory. In Morse, J. M., Bowers, B. J., Charmaz, K., Clarke, A. E., Corbin, J., & Porr, C. J. (Eds.) *Developing grounded theory: The second generation revisited* (pp. 79-89). Routledge.

Corbin, J. M., & Strauss, A. (1990). Grounded theory research: Procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. *Qualitative sociology*, *13*(1), 3-21.

Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs. (2024). *2024 CACREP standards*. https://www.cacrep.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/2024-Standards-Combined-Version-4.11.2024.pdf

Creswell, J.W., & Poth, C.N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage Publications

Cunningham, L. (2009). *An introduction to Catholicism*. Cambridge University Press.

Darlaston-Jones, D. (2007). Making connections: The relationship between epistemology and research methods. *Australian Community Psychologist*, *19*(1), 19-27.

Davie, G. (1990). Believing without belonging: Is this the future of religion in Britain?. *Social compass*, *37*(4), 455-469.

Davis, M. (2015). Theorizing religious abuse within the context of intimate partner violence: The African American community. *Journal of Black sexuality and relationships*, *1*(4), 45-61.

The Deconstruction Network. (2020, October). *Who are deconstructing Christians? The Deconstruction Network's initial survey 2020: Executive summary*. https://thedeconstructionnetwork.com/initial-survey-results-dec-2020/

Dein, S. (2013). Religious doubts: Implications for psychopathology and psychotherapy. *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic, 77*(3), 201–21.

Derrida, J. (1967). *De la grammatologie*, Paris: Éditions de Minuit.

Downie, A. (2022). Christian shame and religious trauma. *Religions*, *13*(10), 925.

Ellison, C. G., & Lee, J. (2010). Spiritual struggles and psychological distress: Is there a dark side of religion?. *Social Indicators Research*, *98*, 501-517.

Erikson, E. H. 1963. *Childhood and society*. New York: Basic Books.

Exline, J. J. (2022, July 26) *Working with spiritual struggles in psychotherapy: From research to practice.* https://spiritualityandhealth.duke.edu/files/2022/07/Spiritual-Struggles-Koenig-Seminar-072622.pdf

Exline, J. J., & Rose, E. (2005). Religious and spiritual struggles. *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality*, 315-330.

Fenelon, A., & Danielsen, S. (2016). Leaving my religion: Understanding the relationship between religious disaffiliation, health, and well-being. *Social science research*, *57*, 49–62. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2016.01.007

Fisher, A. R. (2017). A review and conceptual model of the research on doubt, disaffiliation, and related religious changes. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, *9*(4), 358.

Fowler, J. W. (2001). Faith development theory and the postmodern challenges. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion 11*(3), 159–72.

Gear, M. R., Krumrei, E. J., & Pargament, K. I. (2009). Development of a spiritually-sensitive intervention for college students experiencing spiritual struggles: Winding road. *Journal of College & Character*, *10*(4), 1-5.

Glaser, B. G., Strauss, A. L., & Strutzel, E. (1968). The discovery of grounded theory; strategies for qualitative research. *Nursing research*, *17*(4), 364.

Goldenberg, N. (2022). The contemporary deconstruction of religion: How current scholarship in religious studies is changing methods and theories. *PORTAL Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies*, *18*(1-2).

Gull, B. L. (2022). *Becoming exvangelical: The faith journeys, identity work, and activism of former evangelicals in the digital age* (Doctoral dissertation, The University of Utah).

Hall, M. E., & Hill, P. (2019). Meaning-making, suffering, and religion: A worldview conception. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, *22*(5), 467-479.

Haney, A. M., & Rollock, D. (2020). A matter of faith: The role of religion, doubt, and personality in emerging adult mental health. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality 12*(2), 247–53.

Hays, D. G. (2020). Multicultural and social justice counseling competency research: Opportunities for innovation. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 98*(3), 331-344.

Herrington, A. J. (2024). *Deconstructing your faith without losing yourself*. Eerdmans.

Jacobs, C. M., & Theiss-Morse, E. (2013). Belonging in a "Christian Nation": The explicit and implicit associations between religion and national group membership. *Politics and Religion*, *6*(2), 373-401.

Jankowski, P. J., Sandage, S. J., Wang, D. C., & Crabtree, S. (2022). Virtues as mediators of the associations between religious/spiritual commitment and well-being. *Applied Research in Quality of Life*, *17*(5), 2877-2901.

Johnson, P. (1976). *A history of Christianity*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Jones, S. R., Torres, V., & Arminio, J. (2014). *Negotiating the complexities of qualitative research in higher education: Fundamental elements and issues* (2nd Ed.). Routledge.

Kidd, T. S. (2019). *Who is an Evangelical?: The history of a movement in crisis*. Yale University Press.

Knight, A., Esmiol Wilson, E., Ward, D., & Nice, L. (2019). Examining religious disaffiliation through a family systems lens: Implications for treatment. *Journal of couple & relationship therapy*, *18*(2), 170-187.

Koenig, H. G., McCullough, M. E., Larson, D. B. (2001). *Handbook of religion and health* (1st ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.

Koenig, H. G., King, D. E., & Carson, V. B. (2012). *Handbook of religion and health* (2nd ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.

Lincoln, Y., & Guba E. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverley Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

Lurcza, Z. (2014). Cultural identity and deconstruction. *Studia Universitatis Babes-Bolyai-Philosophia*, *59*(3), 69-82.

Mahoney, M. J., & Granvold, D. K. (2005). Constructivism and psychotherapy. *World Psychiatry*, *4*(2), 74.

Manglos-Weber, N., Alvarez Hurtado, C., & Wang, D. C. (2024). The spirituality of deconstruction in United States theological schools. *Religions*, *15*(2), 188.

Manoiu, R., Hammond, N. G., Yamin, S., & Stinchcombe, A. (2023). Religion/spirituality, mental health, and the lifespan: Findings from a representative sample of Canadian adults. *Canadian Journal on Aging/La Revue canadienne du vieillissement*, *42*(1), 115-125.

Marti, G., & Ganiel, G. (2014). *The deconstructed church: Understanding emerging Christianity*. Oxford University Press.

McGrath, A. E. (2006). *Christianity: An introduction*. John Wiley & Sons.

Mehta, Y., & Mishra, A. (2024). The role of religion in shaping cultural norms and values: A sociological perspective. *CINEFORUM*, *64*(1), 24-28.

Miller, B. J. (2014). The Evangelicals you don't know: Introducing the next generation of Christians.

Monnot, C., & Wernli, B. (2023). Moving away from religion: Age, cohort, or period effect? Evidence from a longitudinal survey in Switzerland. *Religions*, *14*(4), 493.

Morrow, S. L. (2005). Quality and trustworthiness in qualitative research in counseling psychology. *Journal of counseling psychology*, *52*(2), 250.

Moslener, S. (2015). Virgin nation: Sexual purity and American adolescence. Oxford University Press.

Murray-Swank, N. A., & Pargament, K. I. (2005). God, where are you?: Evaluating a spiritually-integrated intervention for sexual abuse. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture, 8*(3), 191-203. doi: 10.1080/13694670500138866

National Association of Evangelicals (n.d.). *What is an evangelical?* https://www.nae.org/what-is-an-evangelical/

National Research Council. (2003). *Protecting participants and facilitating social and behavioral sciences research*. National Academies Press.

Nica, A. A. (2020). Leaving my religion: How ex-fundamentalists reconstruct identity related to well-being. *Journal of religion and health*, *59*, 2120-2134.

Nye, M. (2008). *Religion: the basics*. Routledge.

Onishi, B. (2019, April 9). *The rise of #exvangelical*. Religion & Politics. https://religionandpolitics.org/2019/04/09/the-rise-of-exvangelical/

Paloutzian, R. F., & Park, C. L. (2005). Integrative themes in the current science of the psychology of religion. *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality* 1, 3-20.

Pargament, K. I., Mahoney, A., Exline, J. J., Jones, J. W., & Shafranske, E. P. (2013). *Envisioning an integrative paradigm for the psychology of religion and spirituality*. In K. I. Pargament, J. J. Exline, & J. W. Jones (Eds.), APA handbook of psychology, religion, and spirituality (Vol. 1): Context, theory, and research (pp. 3–19). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Patrick, J. H., & Henrie, J. A. (2015). Religious doubt and spiritual growth among adults bereaved of a grandparent. *Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Aging*, *27*(2-3), 93-107.

Peng-Keller, S. (2010). Einführung in die theologie der spiritualität [introduction to the theology of spirituality]. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.

Pew Research Center (2015). https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/

Pew Research Center (2017). Orthodox Christianity in the 21st century. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/11/08/orthodox-christianity-in-the-21st-century/

Porr, C. J., & Stern, P. N. (2021). Glaserian grounded theory. In Morse, J. M., Bowers, B. J., Charmaz, K., Clarke, A. E., Corbin, J., & Porr, C. J. (Eds.) *Developing grounded theory: The second generation revisited* (pp. 79-89). Routledge.

Post, B. C., & Wade, N. G. (2009). Religion and spirituality in psychotherapy: A practice-friendly review of research. *Journal of clinical psychology*, *65*(2), 131-146.

Pratt, H., Middleton, R., Molloy, L., & Moroney, T. (2023). Connectivity: Person-Centred research principles to inform Constructivist Grounded Theory. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *22*, 16094069231205788.

Prout, T. A., Magaldi, D., Kim, E. E., & Cha, J. (2021). Christian therapists and their clients. *Spirituality in Clinical Practice*, *8*(1).

Puffer, K. A., Pence, K. G., Graverson, M., Wolfe, M., Pate, E., & Clegg, S. Religious doubt and identity formation: Salient predictors of adolescent religious doubt. *J. Psychol. Theol. 2008, 36*, 270–284.

Ramler, M. E. (2023). When God hurts: The rhetoric of religious trauma as epistemic pain. *Rhetoric Society Quarterly, 53*(2), 202-216.

Rassool, G. H. (2023). Critical reflections on current status of scholarship in Islamic psychology – challenges and solutions. *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies, 8*(3), 37-54.

Ratts, M. J., Singh, A. A., Nassar-McMillan, S., Butler, S. K., & McCullough, J. R. (2016). Multicultural and social justice counseling competencies: Guidelines for the counseling profession. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 44*(1), 28-48.

Ruden, S. (2010). *Paul among the people: The apostle reinterpreted and reimagined in his own time*. Penguin Random House.

Scheitle, C. P., & Wolf, J. K. (2017). The religious origins and destinations of individuals identifying as a sexual minority. *Sexuality & Culture* (21). 719-740.

Schwandt, T. A. (2003). *Three epistemological stances for qualitative inquiry: Interpretivism, hermeneutics, and social constructionism*. In: N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), The landscape of qualitative research (2nd ed., pp. 292-331). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Smith, T. W., Davern, M., Freese, J., & Morgan, S. L. (2019). *General social surveys, 1972–2018: Cumulative codebook*. Chicago: NORC.

Stahl, N. A., & King, J. R. (2020) Expanding approaches for research: Understanding and using trustworthiness in qualitative research. *Journal of Developmental Education*, 44, 26-28.

Stern, P. N. (1994). *Eroding grounded theory*. In J. M. Morse (Ed.), Critical issues in qualitative research methods (pp. 2120223.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Stutey, D. M., Givens, J., Cureton, J. L., & Henderson, A. J. (2020). The practice of bridling: Maintaining openness in phenomenological research. *The Journal of Humanistic Counseling*, *59*(2), 144-156.

Sullivan, G. B. (2017). A Wittgensteinian stance on psychological methods, objectivity, ontology and explanations. *Wittgenstein's Philosophy in Psychology: Interpretations and Applications in Historical Context*, 95-216.

Tan, S. Y. (2022). Dealing with spiritual struggles in psychotherapy: Empirical evidence and clinical applications from a Christian perspective. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity, 41*(4), 311-315.

Thiessen, J., & Wilkins-Laflamme, S. (2017). Becoming a religious none: Irreligious socialization and disaffiliation. *Journal for the scientific study of religion, 56*(1), 64-82.

Upenieks, L. (2021). Changes in religious doubt and physical and mental health in emerging adulthood. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 60*(2), 332-361.

Vagle, M. D. (2010). Re-framing Schön's call for a phenomenology of practice: a post-intentional approach. *Reflective Practice, 11*(3), 393-407.

Verhoeff-Korpershoek, A., Le Comte-van der Burg, M., Vrijmoeth, C., & Schaap-Jonker, H. (2023). A quasi-experimental study of an adjunctive, online psychoeducational module on religious coping for Christian outpatients with depression or anxiety. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality, 15*(1), 56–67. https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000457

Vieten, C., Scammell, S., Pierce, A., Pilato, R., Ammondson, I., Pargament, K. I., & Lukoff, D. (2016). Competencies for psychologists in the domains of religion and spirituality. *Spirituality in Clinical Practice, 3*(2), 92-114.

Visser-Vogel, E., Westerink, J., de Kock, J., Barnard, M., & Bakker, C. (2012). Developing a framework for research on religious identity development of highly committed adolescents. *Religious Education, 107*(2), 108-121.

Voas, D., & Chaves, M. (2016). Is the United States a counterexample to the secularization thesis?. *American Journal of Sociology*, *121*(5), 1517-1556.

Voas, D., & Crockett, A. (2005). Religion in Britain: Neither believing nor belonging. *Sociology*, *39*(1), 11-28.

Vulakh, G., Miles, R., Chavarga, A., Hirsch, E., & Eisen, P. (2023). Attributions of LGBTQ+ identity and religious views on homosexuality to disaffiliation from Orthodox Judaism. *Religions*, *14*(3), 381.

Wild, T. C. (2021). The experience of identity transition among American millennials who disaffiliate from religion. [Doctoral dissertation] Texas A&M University.

Williams, C. (2023, September 12). *Deconstruct Christianity: What today's Christians need to know*. Therapy for Christians. https://www.therapyforchristians.com/blog/deconstruct-christianity

Winell, M. (2011). Religious trauma syndrome (Series of 3 articles). *Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Today*, *39*(2).

Yin, R. K. (2015). *Qualitative research from start to finish*. Guilford publications.

Zhou, S. (2023). American evangelical nationalism: History, status quo, and outlook. *International Journal of Anthropology and Ethnology*, *7*(1), 22.

Appendix A

Interest Form

Religious Deconstruction Research Interest Form

Participation is completely voluntary. Completing this interest form does not signify a commitment or obligation to participate in this study. Participants may discontinue participation at any time with no consequences. More information is available in the study's informed consent document.

* Indicates required question

Legal Name:*

Preferred Name (if different from above):

Pronouns:

Gender:

Email Address:*

Racial/Ethnic Identities:

State of Residence (for time zone purposes):

Do you have experience with deconstructing your previously held evangelical Christian beliefs? For the purposes of this study, evangelical Christian beliefs are defined as doctrine within any denomination or expression of Christianity that emphasizes the following: having a personal relationship with Jesus, the Bible as literal and written by God, and the conversion experience of being born again.*

Are you at least 18 years old? (Participants must be at least 18 years old to participate in the study.)*

By submitting this form, I indicate my interest in participating in this study and that I would like to be contacted via email with more information.*

Appendix B

Interview Guide

How would you describe your process of religious deconstruction?
What factor(s) contributed to the beginning of your religious deconstruction?
How did you experience your sense of self throughout the deconstruction process?
How did you experience your relationships throughout the deconstruction process?
How did you perceive God throughout the deconstruction process?
How did you experience your mental health through the deconstruction process?
Did your beliefs and practices shift through the deconstruction process?
Did you experience any distinct stages or experiences through the deconstruction process?
If any, what challenges within the deconstruction process did you experience?
If any, what benefits of the deconstruction process did you experience?

Appendix C

Helpful Media

Written works	
Author	Specific work(s), if applicable
Reza Aslan	Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth
Cynthia Bourgeault	
Sarah Bessey	Jesus Feminist: An Invitation to Revisit the Bible's View of Women; Out of Sorts: Making Peace with an Evolving Faith
Nadia Bolz-Weber	Shameless: A Case for Not Feeling Bad About Feeling Good (About Sex)
Richard Carrier	On the Historicity of Jesus: Why We Might Have Reason for Doubt; Jesus from Outer Space: What the Earliest Christians Really Believed about Christ
Bart D. Ehrman	
Rachel Held Evans	A Year of Biblical Womanhood: How a Liberated Woman Found Herself Sitting on Her Roof, Covering Her Head, and Calling Her Husband 'Master'; Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church
Justin Lee	
Linda Kay Klein	Pure: Inside the Evangelical Movement That Shamed a Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free
Robin Wall Kimmerer	Braiding Sweetgrass
DL Mayfield	
Daniel Smith-Christopher	
Francesca Stavrakopoulou	God: An Anatomy
Miriam Toews	Women Talking
Matthew Vines	
Brian Zahnd	Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God: The Scandalous Truth of the Very Good News
Various Authors	Books of Common Prayer
Podcasts	
Podcast Title	Hosts
Dirty Rotten Church Kids	Sarah Heath & Justin Gentry
I was a Teenage Fundamentalist	Bryan McDowell & Troy Walker
Reclaiming My Theology	Brandi Miller
Straight White American Jesus	Bradley Onishi & Daniel Miller
Strongwilled	DL & Krispin Mayfield
Other Media	
Media Title or Subject	Type of Media
1946 | The Mistranslation that Shifted a Culture	Film

Liberation Theology	General subject matter of interest
Mary Magdalene's Gospel	General subject matter of interest
The Reformation Project	Website/online community

ProQuest Number: 32043678

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS
The quality and completeness of this reproduction is dependent on the quality
and completeness of the copy made available to ProQuest.

Distributed by
ProQuest LLC a part of Clarivate (2025).
Copyright of the Dissertation is held by the Author unless otherwise noted.

This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17,
United States Code and other applicable copyright laws.

This work may be used in accordance with the terms of the Creative Commons license
or other rights statement, as indicated in the copyright statement or in the metadata
associated with this work. Unless otherwise specified in the copyright statement
or the metadata, all rights are reserved by the copyright holder.

ProQuest LLC
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
Ann Arbor, MI 48108 USA

View publication stats